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ScienceDirect

International Journal of Project Management 32 (2014) 1182–1196

International Journal of Project Management

www.elsevier.com/locate/ijproman

Learning from international development projects: Blending Critical Project Studies and Critical Development Studies

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Received 27 May 2013; received in revised form 19 December 2013; accepted 14 January 2014
Available online 31 January 2014

Abstract

This article aims at making international development (ID) projects critical. To that end, it shows that project management (PM) in ID has evolved as an offshoot of conventional PM moving like the latter, but at varying speeds, from a traditional approach suited to blueprint projects where tools matter (1960s–1980s); towards eclectic and contingent approaches suited to process projects where people matter the most (1980s–now); and finally pointing towards the potential contribution of a critical perspective which focuses on issues of power (1980s–now). Consequently, it points to a confluence between the Critical Project Studies movement and Critical Development Studies movements. More specifically, it argues that the postdevelopment, the Habermasian, the Foucauldian and the neo-Marxist lenses may be effectively called upon in that scholarship. Thus, it suggests a framework to encourage project actors to reflect on their personal positions in light of the power relations which shape PM in ID.

Keywords: Critical Project Studies; Critical Development Studies; International development; Project management approaches; History; Power

1. Introduction

The past few decades have witnessed a rapid expansion in the reach and impact of project management (PM) (Morris, 2013; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007), notably so outside its traditional heartlands in construction and engineering. Nevertheless, PM is still largely based on experience and research within a relatively narrow set of industries and sectors (Carden and Egan, 2008; Kloppenborg and Opfer, 2002). Since PM is a pluralistic area of management, navigating at the crossroads between specialisation and fragmentation, there is a pressing need to learn from other related areas, sectors, and fields (Gauthier and Ika, 2012; Morris, 2013; Söderlund, 2011).

International development (ID) is one such sector which is specific yet similar to other sectors of PM application in terms of the ubiquitous use of projects to deliver change (Morris, 2013; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007) or in this case, economic growth and/or poverty reduction in the global South drawing on financial support from the North. Within ID, the seemingly mundane, neutral and taken-for-granted conceptions of projects and PM practices have also become ubiquitous (Dar, 2008; Ika et al., 2010; Kerr, 2008; Landoni and Corti, 2011). Arguably, PM in ID has developed as an offshoot of conventional PM since the invention of ID by the US President Truman in the 'Point Four' of his Inaugural Address on 20 January 1949 (Rist, 2008). Thus, both conventional PM and PM in ID date back to the 1950s. Both share a central concern for change in the world. Both historically embody an entrenched inclination towards a managerialist, technocratic, and instrumental approach — a worldview of PM inherited from the fields of engineering, construction, and economics (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Ika, 2012). Both thus have been dominated by assumptions that include an embedded faith in instrumental rationality, objectivity, reductionism and expectations of universal validity (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Ika et al., 2010). Finally, both, as we will contend, have fairly similar project failure rates – at least by some accounts – and the managerial reasons for these failures seem to be virtually the same (Ika, 2012; Lovegrove et al., 2011; The Chaos Report, 2011).

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0263-7863/$36.00
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2014.01.004

In light of this affinity, there have been remarkably few attempts to traverse the divide and compare theory and practice in both PM in ID and conventional PM. The conventional and indeed critical PM literatures have paid relatively little attention to ID projects (notable exceptions being Diallo and Thuillier, 2004; Ika, 2012; Ika et al., 2010; Khang and Moe, 2008; Landoni and Corti, 2011; Youker, 1989). Similarly, although much has been written about ID management (Cooke and Dar, 2008; Curtis and Poon, 2009; Thomas, 1996, 2000), the ID literature has rarely analysed in detail the nature of projects and PM (here, exceptions include Biggs and Smith, 2003; Gow and Morss, 1988; Hirschman, 1967; Hulme, 1995; Khwaja, 2009).

This article represents an initial attempt to consider the development of both PM in ID and conventional PM, their limited interpenetration to date, and the purchase which may be gained through a critical analysis of each. Both fields, it will be argued, have moved at varying speeds from a universalist understanding of the applicability of a rationalist PM 'methodology' to a contingent and eclectic perspective faced with the limitations, failures and necessary adaptations of practices to diverse contexts, environments and settings. Both, we will argue, may be productively analysed drawing on critical perspectives (Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Kerr, 2008). While attempts have been made to bridge critical work on ID and critical work on management, as evidenced in the *New Development Management* (Cooke and Dar, 2008), very few authors have attempted to depict PM in ID in critical terms (Dar, 2008; Kerr, 2008), and those who do have so far failed to relate the critical ID management literature with work in the tradition of Critical Project Studies encompassed by the Making Projects Critical movement (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Cicmil et al., 2009; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006). Similarly, critical research on projects has much to learn from a fuller engagement with past and present research and practice in ID projects.

Thus, this article is not critical in the sense that it challenges the inadequate or inappropriate use of PM practices in ID. Nor it is critical in some sense that there is a room for managerially improving these PM practices. Rather it is critical in the sense that there is something fundamentally wrong with the theory and practice of PM in ID. As such, it explores the interconnections that Critical Project Studies and Critical Development Studies (Cooke and Dar, 2008; Kerr, 2008) offer in terms of scholarship and alternative understandings of ID projects and PM. It promotes the idea that we have to introduce critical theory into the research process in order to move beyond the managerialist, narrow and taken-for-granted instrumentalism that bedevils yet largely defines both conventional PM and PM in ID (Dar, 2008; Hodgson and Cicmil, 2006; Kerr, 2008). This article is a conceptual one, based on a review of both the literatures of conventional PM and PM in ID and at times, for illustration purposes, uses two examples of ID projects.

The contribution and value of the article are twofold. First, it is an attempt to contribute to making ID projects critical and, as such, it suggests a number of ways in which critical approaches could support analyses of ID projects, and a framework to encourage project actors to reflect on their personal positions in light of the power relations which shape PM in ID. Second, its insights could move forward critical research insofar as it looks at PM in ID, in particular, and the limits of projects and projectification, in general.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, it traces the conventional PM history and scope and identifies three key generic approaches that have characterised PM over time. Using this chronological and historical account of conventional PM, it describes and summarises the history and approaches to PM in ID. Then, it opens up a discussion on the possibility of examining systematically PM in ID from a critical perspective and from four specific lenses.

2. Tracing the boundaries and history of project management: from conventional to international development projects

As PM is a social construct that evolves with time, tracing the evolution of PM helps us to understand both what it is and what it is not (Gauthier and Ika, 2012; Morris, 2011, 2013). Various histories of the relatively short life of PM trace its formal existence as a recognised and named discipline, back to the middle of the 20th century (Morris, 2011, 2013), built on the technological achievements of the 1940s/50s onwards in engineering, particularly the military and defence sectors of the US. Its contribution to the delivery of a number of high profile 'megaprojects' in the US through this period and into the 1960s and 1970s, including the various Apollo space missions and other activities of NASA and the US military–industrial complex (Hughes, 1998) raised the stock of PM significantly, supported by the gradual emergence of a number of professional associations in various countries. Given this foundation, it is therefore no surprise that the worldview of conventional PM reflects the established assumptions of the field of engineering. Hence, it was readily argued by proponents of PM that it provided a valuable methodology which would be effective in most or all sectors and settings; as stated by the Project Management Institute (PMI) in their published body of knowledge, 'the knowledge and practices described are applicable to most projects most of the time' (PMI, 2004).

Spurred on by assumptions of (near) universal applicability, the techniques of conventional PM did not long remain confined to engineering and construction, and, hence, the adoption of PM by other sectors, 'from legal work to reconstructive surgery to urban regeneration' (Cicmil et al., 2009, p. 82). This expansion of influence of PM gave rise to the notion of projectification (Lundin and Söderholm, 1998), the progressive colonisation of other areas, sectors and fields of activity by PM 'methodologies'. For many, then, 'the project' may be seen as a defining feature of late modernity, reflecting shifts towards discontinuity, flexibility, insecurity and impermanence across both developed and developing societies (cf. Bauman, 2000; Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

Faced with this diversity of contexts in which the same PM models and techniques were to be implemented, a gradual recognition of the need for adaptation, even a plurality of models emerged (Morris, 2013; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007). For example, since 1987, the PMI PMBoK has been the subject of many adaptations such as government, construction, and US DoD