



Competencies of project managers in international NGOs: Perceptions of practitioners

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Abstract

In international development, despite the professionalization on NGOs of the numerous projects carried out, very few studies address the competencies of project managers in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as opposite to the significant body of studies conducted for private sector projects. This article presents findings from an exploratory study aimed at identifying competencies of international development project managers and how these competencies are used in projects. A survey conducted with international development project managers in NGOs show the very specific situation they have to deal with and the significant change in meaning for project management capacities, considering their very particular environment. Here, human competencies take a new meaning for people who manage projects with limited support, limited resources and a double client system, where they need to satisfy a client donor while respecting local populations which needs are not always compatible with donors' vision.

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1. Introduction

Professionalization of non-governmental organizations working in the field of international development is a phenomenon that emphasizes the importance of competencies of project managers within these organizations (Lewis and Kanji, 2009; Ronalds, 2010; Ryfman, 2009). Previously performed by volunteers, the professionalization of international development and humanitarian action leads experts to build a real professional career whose work is increasingly characterized by managerial criteria in project development as well as in the effectiveness of their action.

Professionalization is not in contradiction with the strong commitment that characterizes the work of people in this field, but the achievement of international development projects has become a specific job which now requires specific competencies such as technical skills, management skills, and human skills. Organizations must be able to count on competent and qualified personnel able to work in the field with different cultures and sometimes in difficult conditions and complex environments (OCDE, 2011).

Following many discussions resulting in an enhanced efficiency of international aid (Millennium Goals, Paris Declaration, Accra Agenda, etc.), this environment is characterized by the presence of poverty and inequity-related issues, accountability to lenders focused on a highly normative framework (Ika et al., 2012), appalling and constantly evolving local conditions (Khang and

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Moe, 2008), as well as the presence of numerous stakeholders and of a network of players with variable needs and abilities (Abbott et al., 2007). The NGO's management style is specific, because of the lack of resources, the decentralized and participative management, a low level of formalization, few reporting levels and a network-style work pattern (Ronalds, 2010; Ryfman, 2009).

In response to these issues and given the fact that these organizations and their project managers play a key role in engaging the civil society in the development of numerous areas, e.g. health, education, governance, gender equality, agriculture, and economic development (Armony, 2008; Navarro-Flores, 2011), we can observe that several studies were conducted on competencies of project managers in this area. However, a literature review showed that although a significant body of literature exists within private sector businesses on a national and international level, very few studies address the particular competencies of project managers in various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that could further inform the thinking of practitioners on competencies they put forward when realizing their projects (Ika et al., 2012). These studies describe the main challenges faced by international development project managers, but from our empirical experience, we have doubts about the application of these studies to the very particular environment of international development NGOs.

When reviewing the literature addressing the competencies of project managers within international development NGOs, we see that in some studies conducted on international development project management (Diallo and Thuillier, 2004; Khang and Moe, 2008), competencies are depicted as one of the key factors to project success, but we sense that these studies do not reflect the particular situation of international NGO projects. Moreover, they mainly use quantitative research methods, which do not necessarily show these nuances in the understanding of competences like leadership or budget management typical to this particular NGO business. Other studies conducted on the competencies of project managers within international development NGOs (Abbott et al., 2007; Crawford et al., 1999) provide information on the work of international development project managers, but do not specifically address this type of environment. They also present data essentially based on secondary data analysis. Other documents present the competencies of project managers in this area (PMD Pro1, 2010) and provide an interesting interpretation, but they are professional guides that do not result from empirical data collection.

Therefore, in light of these assumptions, we assume that competencies of project managers within international development NGOs are different given all the specific features related to the context, in which case further data is necessary to establish a theoretical model that will allow the presentation of the competencies of international development project managers. In this regard, several questions need to be explored: What are the competencies of project managers in international development NGOs? Are they different from those of project managers working in other areas, especially in the private sector? What are specific competencies and how do they actually differ from those identified in the literature? What significant change does the

managers' perspective bring within international development NGOs?

In order to better determine these realities, competencies and practices of international development project managers in NGOs as well as their application at an organizational level, the goal of this research is not only to fill in a gap in the literature, but also to collect new data likely to test the assumptions made and to contribute to new theoretical formulations (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011). The conducted study's main objectives are to identify the competencies specific to international development project managers in NGOs and how these competencies are used according to project characteristics. The study aims at establishing whether the competencies of development project managers are the same as those of project managers from private sector organizations or whether they involve an adaptation or a specialization of the project management discipline.

The unique aspect of this research is the fact that it is based on conducting an original interview round with 28 NGO project managers with an average of over 10 year experience and having worked in several areas and regions of the world. It will help enhance and document, through actual experiences, the literature on competencies of international development project managers. It also provides a framework that allows the undertaking of other research on this subject and supports managers' reflection with respect to international project management within NGOs.

2. Theoretical aspect

There is a significant body of literature that address project managers' competencies that can be observed within private sector businesses. Some studies address the leadership style of project managers with respect to project success (Dean, 2007; Geoghegan and Dulewicz, 2008; Müller and Turner, 2010; Turner and Müller, 2005; Yang et al., 2011), while others present the various types of project managers (Hauschildt et al., 2000). Several of the studies conducted on the competencies of project managers also target specific areas, such as infrastructures (Ahadzie et al., 2009; Chen et al., 2009; Dainty et al., 2004; Toor and Ogunlana, 2008; Wong et al., 2007). Among these studies, several show more specifically the importance of human skills (Alam et al., 2010; Clarke, 2010; Cocco, 1995; El-Sabaa, 2001; Henderson, 2008; Pant and Baroudi, 2008) or soft skills (Gillard and Price, 2005; Leybourne and Sadler-Smith, 2006; Muzio et al, 2007; Neuhauser, 2007; Skulmoski and Hartman, 2010; Stevenson and Starkweather, 2010). Some studies address more specifically competencies for change management (Crawford and Hahmias, 2010), stress management (Aitken and Crawford, 2007), and result-oriented project management (Gillard and Price, 2005), and sometimes also focus particularly on ethical thinking as a reference point to develop an approach for teaching practical ethics to project managers (Helgadóttir, 2008).

On an international level, literature on the competencies of international managers increasingly addresses the intercultural aspects of management within private businesses (Cerimagic, 2010; Lee et al., 2007; Lientz and Rea, 2003; Moodian, 2009; Ochieng and Price, 2010; Thomas and Walter, 2008). According to the literature review that address international projects in

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