



# Approaches to project management in Africa: implications for international development projects

Ndiritu Muriithi<sup>a,\*</sup>, Lynn Crawford<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*The Africa Project Development Facility, Mama Ngina Street, PO Box 46534, Nairobi, Kenya*

<sup>b</sup>*University of Technology, Sydney, PO Box 123, Broadway, NSW 2007, Australia*

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the applicability and relevance of project management approaches, tools and techniques in Africa. Project management is a field of practice that promotes a normative approach to the management of projects. It is codified in standards, tools and techniques, based primarily on experiences of practitioners in developed Western economies and relies extensively on assumptions of economic rationality. Such approaches are embodied in project management knowledge and practice guides of professional institutes (e.g. Project Management Institute and Association for Project Management) and occupational standards for project management endorsed by Australian and United Kingdom governments. The guides and standards have attracted considerable attention in developing and emerging economies, and from agencies concerned with international development, as they seek guidance in improving project performance and more effective use of resources. Using Africa as a case study, this paper explores the applicability of project management approaches, as represented in the most widely distributed and accepted knowledge and practice guides (PMBOK<sup>®</sup> Guide, APMBOK (4th edition) and Australian National Competency Standards for Project Management) to projects in developing and emerging economies. We have used research reviews and secondary analysis, to; explore Africa's cultural values, economic and political conditions, organisational environments, and evaluate project management effort and strategies. From this analysis, we have drawn initial conclusions concerning modifications or extensions required to existing project management standards and guides in order to increase their relevance and applicability for projects in Africa. Issues identified include: the need to cope with political and community demands on project resources, recognition that economic rationality and efficiency, assumed as a basis for many project management tools and techniques does not reflect local realities; and that use of such tools and techniques will not enhance project success if they run counter to cultural and work values. We have tested the findings from analysis of secondary data, against case studies of application in projects in East Africa and drawn final conclusions and implications for project management of international development projects.

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## 1. Introduction

In Africa, theorists and practitioners in many disciplines are increasingly wary of adopting wholesale, concepts of Western origin. There are a number of reasons behind this trend. Most vocal critics especially in humanities are concerned that Europe dominates Africa's world-view. This is seen as undesirable, unwelcome, and a reminder that years after political independence African countries are still in the shadow of their former colonial masters, intellectually, culturally, and economically [25].

The growing weight of empirical evidence from cross-cultural management research [1,2,4,7,11,21,26,28–30] suggests that Western management concepts may be wholly or partially inapplicable and irrelevant to other cultures. Why? Because values at work and in social settings are culturally based—therefore when dealing with human behaviour (i.e. managing) we must recognise the cultural context.

Some project management writers have dealt with this issue. Turner [33] for example, observes... 'contrary to the common belief that the Western-oriented techniques of project management are just straight forward procedures that anyone can learn and implement, there are considerable cross-cultural problems in using the approach in non-Western Countries' (p. 510). Mbatha

\* Corresponding author. Fax: +254-2-339121.

*E-mail addresses:* nmuriithi@ifc.org (N. Muriithi),  
lynn.crawford@uts.edu.au (L. Crawford).

[22] proposed a project management framework for Kenya, and Jessen [15] suggests that some cultures are better suited for project management than others. Blunt and Jones [4] have extended these concepts to leadership theory, and Lubatkin et al. [21], to the nature of managerial work, as well as managers' attitudes and beliefs about their work.

### 1.1. Conceptual relationships

Cultures vary from country to country, and within countries. As a result, values at work, and in social settings will vary accordingly. Personal choices and work values are culturally dependent. Central to validity of cross-cultural management concepts therefore, is the supposition that these variations can be measured, or at the very least represented.

One of the more celebrated pieces of research into cultural differences and their influence on work related value patterns, is Hofstede's work. Hofstede [11,12] provides a framework for representing cultural differences. Further, he concludes that work and the more general 'quality of life' concepts are culturally based. This suggests that motivational theories that seek to identify major variables influencing behaviour (such as Maslow's Need Hierarchy, McClelland's Theory of Need for Achievement and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory) do not have validity across cultures. This is because different values play dominant roles in different cultures. Simply put, motivating a project team will imply focusing on different things depending on team composition and or location.

A second supposition crucial for valid cross-cultural management concepts is that by studying cultural differences, one can determine appropriate modifications to current management theories, in order to apply them successfully in different countries and cultures.

Fig. 1 represents the conceptual relationships implied in the earlier propositions. It suggests that if project management concepts and strategies for undertaking projects are put through the filter of cultural values, and then compared to the project environments in Africa, an appropriate framework can be developed. Using this framework, appropriate approaches to project management in Africa can be proposed.

Jessen [15] and Mbatha [22] have done related work. Jessen used Hofstede's dimensions for representing cultural differences to suggest country fitness for project management. Mbatha built on project management systems found in Germany, France, USA and UK to suggest a conceptual framework for project management in Kenya. Blunt and Jones [4], used Hofstede's dimensions to explore the limits of Western leadership theories, and suggested appropriate leadership concepts for Africa. We briefly review each cluster of concepts (Fig. 1) in the following sections.

## 2. Project management fundamentals

Turner [33], defines a project as; "an endeavour in which human, material and financial resources are organised in a novel way, to undertake a unique scope of work, of given specification, within constraints of cost and time, so as to achieve beneficial change defined by quantitative and qualitative objectives" (p. 8).

### 2.1. Project management

Project management is the process by which a project is completed successfully [33]. PMI has a similar view. The PMBOK® Guide [27] defines project management as "the application of knowledge, skills, tools and techniques in order to meet or exceed stakeholder requirements from a project" (p. 63).

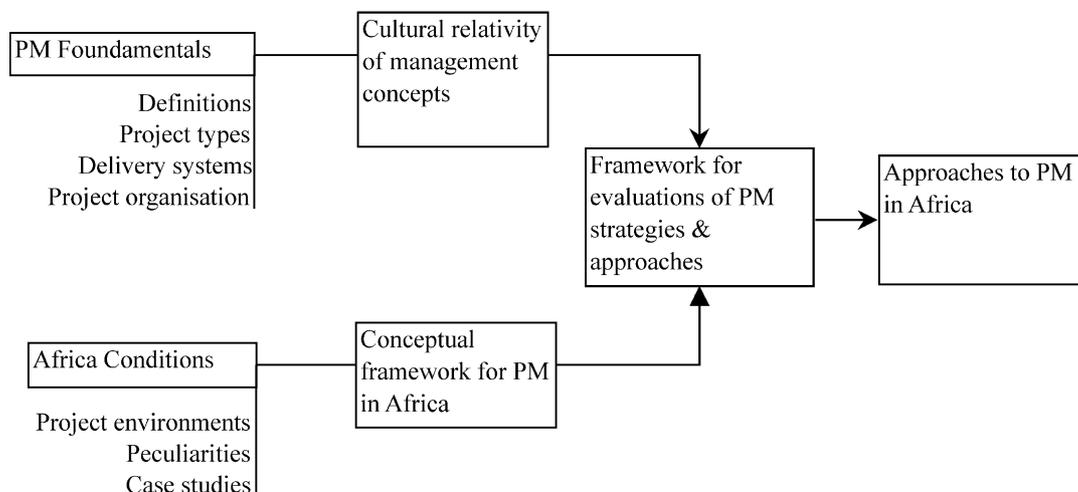


Fig. 1. Conceptual relationship.

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