



A Paradox of Learning in Project Cycle Management and the Role of Organizational Culture

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Summary. — Advocacy in favor of project cycle management (PCM) for development work continues to increase, with new PCM tools and techniques constantly introduced. There is, however, a growing literature documenting the “failures” of PCM in practice. There seems to be a paradox in the stance of the PCM literature. While at the center of its approach is the idea of a “learning cycle,” the normative PCM manuals appear remarkably robust against such learning. This paper argues that not enough attention is given to the influence of organizational culture on PCM and proposes that frameworks from cultural theory can help in addressing this shortcoming. © 2003 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Key words — project cycle management, organizational culture, participation, organizational learning, cultural theory

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROJECT CYCLE MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

Projects have long been at the core of development activities, as demonstrated by the 1967 publication of Hirschman’s classic book, *Development projects observed*. Thirty years ago, Baum (1970), working for the World Bank, introduced the “project cycle” as a rational way of conceptualizing, and then managing, projects. It has since become standard practice for development agencies to organize their activities using this type of project cycle management framework (PCMF).

The project cycle consists of a number of progressive phases that, broadly speaking, lead from identification of needs and objectives, through planning and implementation of activities to address these needs and objectives, to assessment of the outcomes. It serves to provide structure and direction to development activities at the same time as allowing for key objectives and issues to remain in focus. Though the exact number of stages in the cycle varies somewhat between organizations, as do the names given to each stage, it is possible to

identify certain generic phases that are present in almost all project cycles; in this paper we call these: programming, identification, design, support, implementation and evaluation (see Figure 1).

Central to the PCMF is the concept of learning: making adjustments during the project cycle in response to ongoing events and taking account of past experience in future

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EVALUATION:

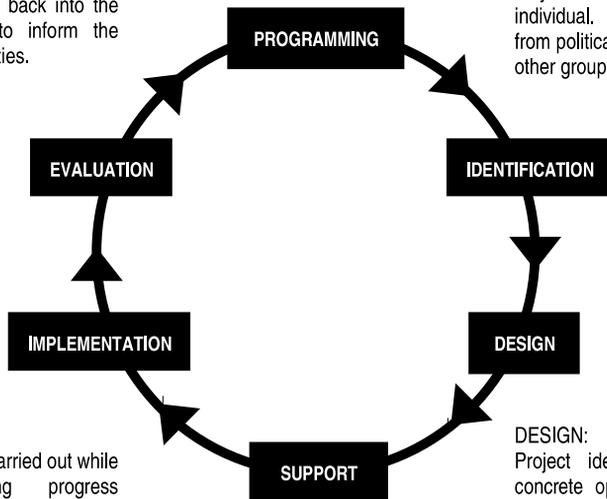
The degree of success/failure of the project is evaluated in terms of its impact on stakeholders and achievement of its objectives, and the lessons learned during the course of the project are reviewed. This information is then fed back into the Programming phase to inform the planning of future activities.

PROGRAMMING:

An overall strategy is established in relation to the local, national and international context. Involves agreeing a broad framework of objectives for a particular country, region or sector within which individual projects can be identified and carried out.

IDENTIFICATION:

The problems and needs of a particular population are assessed, and ideas for ways to address them are generated and analysed. May involve consultation with potential beneficiaries, and/or use of PCM techniques like PRA, problem tree analysis and appreciative inquiry, or may be the 'brainchild' of a particular individual. Influenced by pressure from political, social, cultural, ethnic or other groups.



IMPLEMENTATION:

Planned activities are carried out while constantly monitoring progress towards project objectives. Adjustments often have to be made to the original plans in response to unanticipated circumstances or outcomes.

SUPPORT:

Assistance of various types is sought – financial support, political support, support from partner organizations, etc. Often, gaining the necessary support will require substantial negotiation and may result in changes to project design.

DESIGN:

Project ideas are developed into concrete operational plans that can then be assessed in relation to a number of criteria (e.g. feasibility, environmental impact, gender awareness, sustainability, etc.). Criteria included will depend largely on source and type of support required.

Figure 1. *The project cycle.*

planning. The fact that a cycle is used to represent the project, rather than a linear form, clearly embodies this principal.

The generic description of the project cycle presented in Figure 1 belies the fact that it has been greatly refined and developed over the years. The older “blueprint” project cycle has been broadened to take on “process” ideas. Participatory processes have been introduced with recommendations for stakeholders, especially potential beneficiaries, to be included at every stage from identification to evaluation.

A whole new range of assessment criteria has been added to the original economic criteria, so that concerns such as the environment, poverty, gender, empowerment, human rights, capacity building, institutional development and sustainability can be included in the assessments that take place at various points in the cycle.

In addition, a number of tools have been developed for use within the PCMF. One of the most widely used is the Logical Framework (logframe), developed by the United States Agency for International Development

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