



Adoption of project management practices: The impact on international development projects of non-governmental organizations

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Abstract

International Development (ID) projects carried out by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are considered one of the pillars for providing assistance to developing countries, but these projects are reported to have high failure rates and their performance is often considered not satisfactory. Only recently researchers started to consider project management (PM) practices as possible remedy for the poor performance of ID projects. Following this direction, we have conducted a large-scale survey among project managers working for NGOs and dealing with ID projects to assess the extent of adoption of methodologies and tools. Moreover, this study assesses the impact of the PM practices on project performance. We present an analysis and discussion of the evidence from this international survey administered to almost 500 project managers. The results indicate different levels of maturity in the adoption of PM tools that are related to project success in both the short and long term.

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1. Introduction

Most international assistance provided by governments and NGOs to developing countries is provided via projects (Diallo and Thuillier, 2005). In contrast to emergency projects, International Development (ID) projects do not have the objective to provide immediate assistance to populations affected by wars or natural disasters, and they usually take place in more stable contexts with the aim of improving living conditions in terms of economy, education, or health. During the Eighties, there was a proliferation of such projects. These

were promoted by different donors, countries and organizations but not always in a coordinated way (Morss, 1984). Even in recent years, there has been a growing trend of money and human capital employed in ID projects (Diallo and Thuillier, 2005; OECD, 2008, 2009). As a consequence, a number of global players have worked for decades to establish solid project management (PM) practice. The World Bank, US AID, the OECD's Development Assistance Committee, and the Canadian International Development Agency have developed their own standards (Landoni and Corti, 2011) and supported related training and education in developing countries directly or through training organizations.

However, despite the importance and the peculiar critical success factors of ID projects (Hermano et al., 2013; Ika et al., 2012), limited attention has been devoted in the literature to best practices, approaches, and management techniques in this field. In fact, several authors have suggested the need for

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additional research (Youker, 2003), particularly regarding PM tools and approaches (Khang and Moe, 2008; Landoni and Corti, 2011).

Generally speaking, there are very few studies in the development and PM literature about the diffusion of standards and methodologies within organizations (Ahlemann et al., 2009), even private ones. This represents a gap that researchers and practitioners are attempting to fill and that, over time, has led to extensions of PM standards adapted to specific contexts (Besner and Hobbs, 2008). Despite the universalist nature of PM methodologies, different contexts reflect different approaches toward PM (Dahlman et al., 1987; Hanisch and Wald, 2012). This is particularly true for ID projects, which present very peculiar characteristics (e.g., not-for-profit nature, high stakeholder involvement) (e.g., Golini et al., 2012; Gow and Morss, 1988; Youker, 2003). Some specific approaches for ID projects have been introduced (e.g., Baum's "project cycle" and the Logical Framework) (Baum, 1970), but the analysis of the usefulness of these tools and their integration with other PM techniques is still in its early stages. The need for a deeper analysis is reflected in the empirical evidence showing that ID projects often lack efficiency and effectiveness (Ika, 2012; Lovegrove et al., 2011).

In this study, we use an international survey to study the diffusion of PM tools and methodologies among project managers working in NGOs and dealing with ID projects. As a matter of fact, NGOs carry an increasing share of such projects and some of them gained a prominent international role (Korten, 1987). Moreover, we relate the adoption of such tools and methodologies to the performance achieved at both the internal (i.e., project) and external (i.e., stakeholders) levels. The results show that there is a progressive adoption of PM tools, starting from the Logical Framework toward more sophisticated tools. We also found that project managers can achieve good project performance with a basic set of tools, and with the adoption of more tools, they can improve the long-term impact on the recipients of the projects.

The paper provides several insights. First of all we provide a way to assess the existence of maturity stages in the adoption of PM tools. Next, we highlight the existence of a complex relationship between these stages and project performance. Moreover, we show how long term outcomes of the project can be achieved both via internal project performance and the correct adoption of the tools. Finally, since traditional business projects increasingly share some characteristics with ID projects (e.g., increasing complexity, high number of stakeholders) our results can also be useful for scholars and practitioners working outside the ID field.

The paper is organized as follows. In the first section, a literature review on PM practices and tools and their impact on project performance is presented, leading to the formulation of the two research questions. In the second section, the research sample and the methodology are discussed, followed by a third section in which the answers to the two research questions are presented. The fourth and

final section discusses the results of the analysis and the impact of PM tools on ID project results.

2. Literature review and research question

PM practices vary significantly from one type of project to another (Payne and Turner, 1999). Different tools, techniques, and approaches are applied to different types of projects even within the same organization to adapt PM methods to the specific needs of each project (Crawford et al., 2005). This is particularly true for ID projects, which present peculiar characteristics that led to the development of dedicated methodologies.

First of all, in ID projects, the target "customer" or beneficiary is a community in a developing country with boundaries that are not clearly defined. This community benefits from the project output, but its members generally do not fund the project (Ahsan and Gunawan, 2010) and often they do not have high technical and managerial capabilities (Golini and Landoni, 2014). As a consequence, beneficiaries are often not included in the project design phases leading to fatal errors in the execution of the project (Ika, 2012). Moreover, ID projects are frequently carried in difficult environments in terms of natural, political, or social factors. These projects also involve many stakeholders in different countries and have to deliver intangible outputs (e.g., training and education, society empowerment) or outcomes (e.g., alleviation of poverty, improvement of standards of living, protection of basic human rights) (Youker, 2003).

To include these peculiarities in PM practices, some PM guidelines have been created for NGOs managing ID projects. The two best-known guidelines are PMDPro (developed by PM4NGO) and PM4DEV. These guidelines are well known among practitioners and are considered a good alternative to or integration of the standard methodologies (e.g., PMBOK by PMI or IPMA competence baseline). However, a comparison among these methodologies (Golini and Landoni, 2013; Hermano et al., 2013) shows that tools are very similar and that ID projects can benefit from the practices developed in business environments, and vice versa. For instance, their comparison indicated that all tools included in the PMBOK® Guide are also present in the other two guides (PM4DEV and PMDPro), except for the Logical Framework and tree analyses (problem tree, objective tree, and alternative tree). Furthermore, these authors highlight that the project life cycles and the main PM processes are very similar.

However, despite this convergence in the guidelines, PM tools have often a scattered adoption, some are better known and have more widespread use, whereas other tools are more sophisticated and less diffused. For instance, Besner and Hobbs (2008) found in their survey that some tools are used extensively (e.g., work breakdown structure), whereas others have very limited adoption (e.g., project evaluation and review technique). This difference may depend on the industry or the maturity of an organization

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