

Who is the International Development Project Manager?

AI Zeitoun, PhD, PMP, International Institute for Learning, Inc.

Introduction

International development projects environment is special in nature and has certain effects on the project manager working in that field. These projects are unique in circumstances, stakeholders, and socioeconomic factors. In addition to working across many countries and cultures, the international development project manager is faced with a series of constraints and limitations that are distinctive to these projects. This paper is an attempt to better define what makes these projects a particular group and then reflect on the skills and qualities of the project manager accountable for their success.

International development project management deals with the application of project management in projects delivering products and services in the international development arena such as in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Far East. Examples of these

projects include civil rights, social development, health systems, educational improvement, and infrastructure projects. Several of these projects focus on the softer sectors.

Typical Project Life Cycle for a Country

In order to understand the nature of international development projects, it is useful to start by looking at the life cycle of a typical development project. Exhibit 1 shows a typical project life cycle from a country's perspective.

Life-cycle phases are useful in improving the standardization and control aspects of a given project. The standardization takes place when there is an understanding of what takes place in each given phase and possibly subphase. The control takes place by conducting

Exhibit 1. A Typical Project Life Cycle for an International Development Project

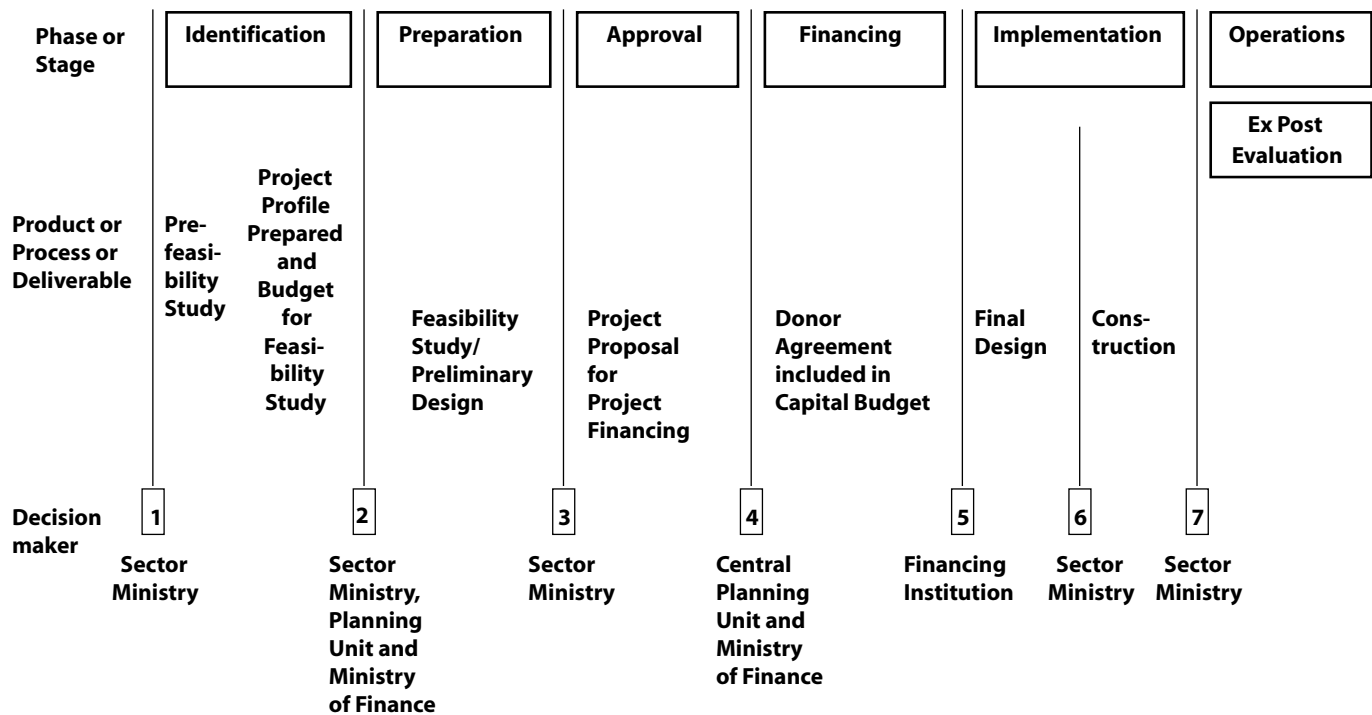
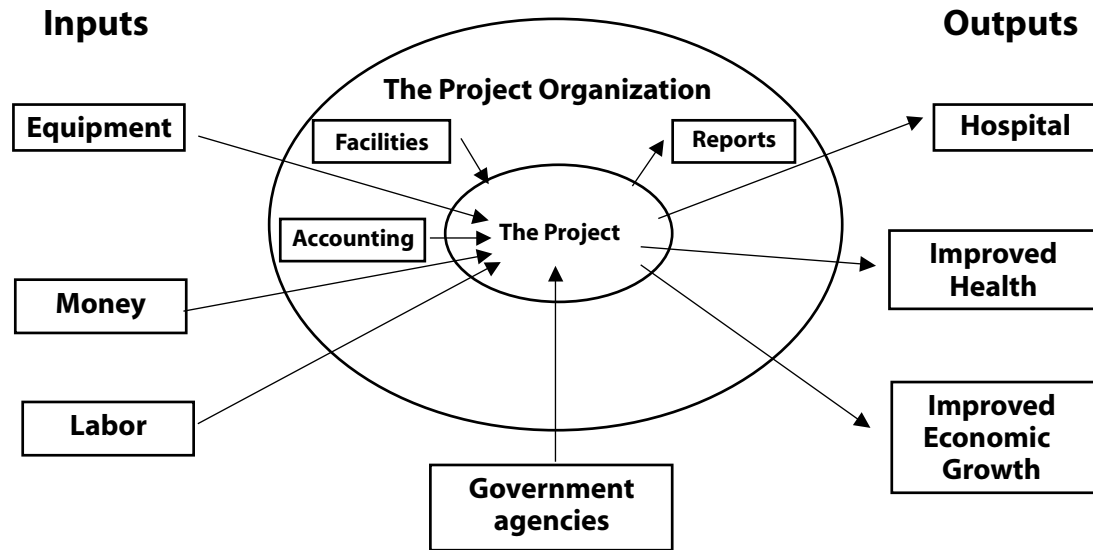


Exhibit 2. The Project Environment



formal reviews at the transition points between phases called decision gates or go/no-go points. This life cycle understanding encourages the creation of templates to be used by the various international development project managers and checklists to do timely validation of the project's direction along the way before it becomes too late to either adjust it or cancel it.

This systematic approach saves on waste and creates a discipline of documented lessons learned that are transmitted from a project to a project. However, the project manager has to be careful to stay flexible in the reuse of these templates since the variability in international development projects is higher than the average project.

Comparing the country's project life cycle to a generic project life cycle shows the greater emphasis on the early phases. Instead of just a concept phase in a generic project, there are four key phases in a typical country's project life cycle. The identification, preparation, approval, and financing all have to be completed and approved before actual implementation could begin. This also indicates that there is a higher need for involving the right parties in the early stages and getting their full buy in because it would be rather late and costly to do that in the implementation phase.

The International Development Project Environment

There are many stakeholders who have an interest in the outputs of international development projects. Suppliers who provide goods, work, or services to the project are interested stakeholders because they receive income for the inputs they provide to these projects. People who benefit from the project's outputs are also stakeholders, as are people who may be adversely affected by these projects. A simple way to think of these projects' stakeholders is in terms of people who may potentially care about the project because it touches their lives in some way, either positively or negatively. International development projects tend to touch the lives of the masses across the globe.

An example of stakeholders that might indirectly affect the project is policymakers who have no direct interest in a particular project but may cause conditions in the environment to change dramatically, which may have major consequences for a particular project. For example, a general reduction in tariffs may make imported equipment more affordable. This may make it possible to shorten the project schedule of a development project such as building a hospital.

There are factors or circumstances in the environment, such as bad weather, inflation, or war, that can affect a project or, as in the case of pollution or illiteracy, be made better or worse by a project. These factors include problems with infrastructure such as roads, shortages of needed materials, such as cement for building the hospital, and unanticipated periods of rain, which may delay construction and increase costs. Other factors include the social, economic, political, and environmental effects that the project will produce. For example, the new hospital may create employment opportunities by providing new jobs for needed hospital staff. Over the longer term, the new hospital contributes to improving the health in the community, and it may raise the overall life expectancy in the community or region.

Throughout a development project implementation, the project manager should proactively evaluate the project environment to identify the stakeholders and factors that need special attention. For example, the actions of central banks may influence the rate of inflation, which in turn, may affect the cost of the hospital project. It is also important for the project manager to consider those stakeholders with an interest in the project's outputs. Many projects fail operationally because constituencies had not been adequately consulted and prepared to accept the project during design and implementation or because management, during implementation, did not take into account changes that were occurring in the broader project environment.

Exhibit 2 shows a simple view of the international development project environment. The factors affecting these projects could be categorized as follows:

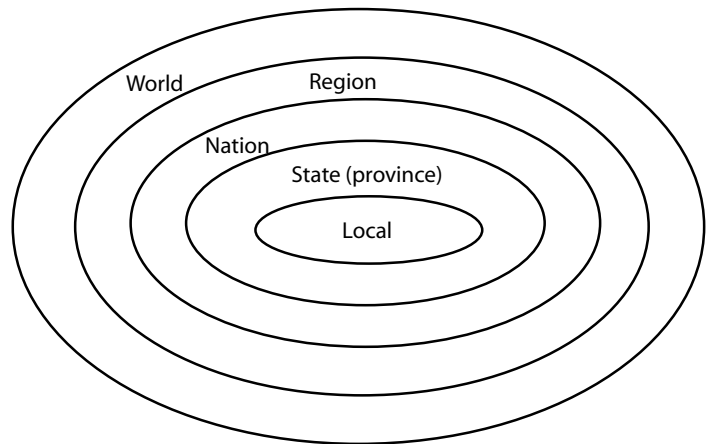
- Technological, such as availability of the needed technology
- Commercial/Financial/Economic, such as local banks impacting the project
- Cultural/Social/Psychological, such as the attitudes of the locals
- Political/Legal, such as the local government agencies
- Physical, such as the local weather or geological conditions affecting the project
- Infrastructure, such as the available power supply or road systems.

Exhibit 3 shows the extended surroundings for the international development project manager. The international development projects factors change in complexity as the project's scope changes to cover levels all the way to the world level. The project manager's skills vary dramatically in the environmental conditions, the knowledge level, and cultural sensitivity. Whether it is a local level project or all the way to a project at the world level, the following issues seem to seriously affect international development project management and the associated skills of the project manager in that environment.

- Lack of shared perception and agreement on the objectives of a project by staff and stakeholders, which might be solved by emphasizing the concept of a project charter and pushing for the discipline of its use and respect
- Lack of commitment to the project by the team, management, and stakeholders, which would be improved by involving some key players and team members from the country or the region in the initial decisions and in the planning process
- Lack of detailed, realistic and current project plans, which would be enhanced also with the right participants and by creating the awareness that enough time needs to be spent on the planning process
- Lack of strong leadership, which would be enhanced by creating a project champion or sponsor with a special interest in supporting the project toward attaining its objectives
- Unclear lines of authority and responsibility, which could be improved by using a Responsibility Assignment Matrix that aligns the resources with the various project deliverables
- Lack of adequate resources, which would be better handled by focusing on clarifying the key project deliverables and getting decision-makers' understanding for the needed associated resources
- Organization not committed to, or structured for, project management, which requires culture change and major training efforts
- Poor feedback and control processes so that project problems aren't detected early, which requires improvement in communications and use of standardized project management software and other means to simplify timely data exchange
- Poor or no analysis of major risk factors, which could be solved by enforcing a discipline of using a risk handling matrix or checklists at the onset of the project and throughout the project phases
- Delays caused by bureaucratic administrative systems, which might require putting pressure on the country or region and showing them lessons learned of the consequences of such delays
- Delays in approvals
- Slow decisions in personnel administration
- Delays in procurement and import of goods
- Delays in release of funds
- Delays in land acquisition.

Many of these barriers affect the average project but tend to have more weight in international development projects due to their specific nature and unique stakeholders.

Exhibit 3. The Project Manager's Surroundings



The International Development Project Organization Structure

It is difficult to decide on the organizational design without also deciding on whom to select as the project manager and what kind of format we need for the planning and reporting systems. These decisions are closely interrelated. For example, a successful project organization requires a project manager with general management broad skills. The project manager must combine technical knowledge of the subject matter with general management abilities before being able to lead the entire project team. It makes no sense to select a project organization form if such a project manager is not available.

Most international development projects appoint project coordinators. Thus a common format for a project organization in international development projects is the matrix organization. A common picture of the project coordinator in a matrix organization is of a *frustrated diplomat* struggling to entice the functional departments into performing the work on schedule and within budget. The project manager's position is difficult, but the following approaches can help:

1. It is important to have a project charter from top management defining responsibilities and authority for the project manager as well as the role of the functional departments.
2. The project coordinator or manager must anticipate conflicts in the matrix. Conflict is inevitable with dual authority, but it can be constructively channeled.
3. Since conflict is inevitable, it is important to take positive steps to develop teamwork. Regular lunches or social gatherings help to foster a team spirit. In recent years the behavioral sciences have developed a number of specific techniques for alleviating or using conflict effectively. Training programs for matrix managers should include experiences with such techniques.
4. The project coordinator's main power comes from the approved objectives, plans, and budgets for the project. These documents should be used to hold departments to their commitments.
5. It is vital that the functional department heads be committed to the plans and schedules for the project as well as the lower-level task leaders. Functional managers should review and sign off on these documents.

Exhibit 4. Global Communications

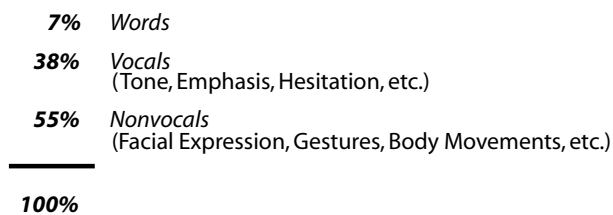
Global Barriers to Communication

- Gender
- Religion
- Technical expertise
- Organizational affiliation
- Native language
- Semantics / language usage
- Culture / geography
- Personality / communication styles



Exhibit 5. Project Manager's Communication Skills

Importance of Nonverbal Communication



Source: Experiments by Mehrabian, Rosenthal, and Lozanov

6. It is generally best to avoid direct conflict with the functional department heads. The matrix manager should use his boss when a situation threatens to get out of hand.

7. It is important to remember that the project coordinator is concerned with "what" is to be done, not "how."

8. Many of the problems of matrix management stem from the uncertainty inherent in the project environment. By definition, a project is a unique effort. Careful and continuous planning can help reduce uncertainty.

No one perfect organizational structure for managing projects exists. The functional, the project, and the different matrix structures all have strengths and weaknesses. The final choice should come after weighing various factors in the nature of the task, the needs of the organization, and the environment of the international development project.

The International Development Project Manager

These factors affecting international development projects lead to emphasizing certain skills for the project manager in charge of these projects. Exhibit 4 shows the barriers that affect communicating in a global environment in general. One of the most difficult ones on the list is the culture. The lack of awareness in how to deal with different cultures, tend to be at the top of the reasons when a project manager is failing in global projects.

The interesting issue for the global project manager is to be reminded that the majority of the project communications are either vocals or non-vocals, as seen in Exhibit 5. This gives the project manager a great edge for emphasizing communications in the case where the project manager's local language skill is not great or the locals understanding of the project manager's language is weak.

The following are key items that could belong in a *checklist* for the project managers working on international development projects:

Exercise self-control: This item is crucial due to the different and unique nature of situations and stakeholders that could easily make it difficult to lose self-control.

Maintain open mind: The way things are handled in developing countries and regions are sometimes difficult to understand and might even tend to be unacceptable. The project manager has to understand the circumstances and conditions and stay flexible and professional in his or her approach.

Communicate effectively: The art of communication has to shine in international development projects. The project manager has to be able to convey the same message to stakeholders with so many levels of understanding and project influence. Listening is a key here and the project manager's ability to ask the right questions and to know whom to ask in the specific sector or region is crucial.

Embrace diversity: Diversity should be viewed as strength. It enables the project manager to have many sets of expertise and influence that if used properly could enhance the project success chances dramatically.

Exercise tolerance and compromise: Unlike what the project manager might think or like, there is not always either black or white. Patience is crucial in international development projects since the pace of approvals and decisions is quite slow at times. Tolerating certain issues and reaching compromise on other issues has to be recognized as a way of life in these projects.

Exhibit empathy: Whether the projects are focused on the softer sectors like education, or major infrastructure projects, the project manager has to emphasize building strong personal relationships. This is *vital* for any project and most crucial in international development projects. Exhibiting empathy and showing interest in the locals, their lives, and communities can go a long way for the project manager of these projects and could become the only way of getting things done.

The Importance of the Project Management Discipline

The practices of modern project management are defined in the Project Management Institute's (PMI®) *A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide)*. Some of my recent experiences with professional in Yemen and East Europe indicate to me that some international development agencies and the countries and regions affected by the development projects could use improvement in the methodologies and standards that they use. These standards could help unify practitioners of project managers on a global level, which is of most importance in the success of these international development projects.

The following is an extract of a speech by Mr. Lindhal, President and CEO of ABB on globalization issues:

Globalization presents a unique opportunity for companies to integrate more closely with their political, social, and economic surroundings—and an obligation to play active roles in society. It is a call to work alongside one another to trigger change—sharing technology in developing markets, opening information flows and aiming to promote sustainability and economic development, ... and to improve global citizenship through advocacy, shared experience, and partnership.

One of the groups that are trying to make a difference in the management of international development projects is the Intentional Development Specific Interest Group of the Project Management Institute. Some of IDSIG strategic projects include the Body of Knowledge that is needed for this specific field and the possible extension to the *PMBOK® Guide*. These efforts are crucial in bringing focus on the specific and specialized project management needs and issues of this specific International Development subgroup within the project management stakeholders.

Other areas of focus for the ID SIG include establishing and promoting a forum of communications and interchange between international development project management professionals. This could help in creating a culture for the project management profession on internationally funded development projects and programs in developing countries and within international development institutions.

References

Managing the Implementation of Development Projects, by the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank

Project Management and the United Nations System; A Partnership for Prosperity, by Andrew Robertson. World Project Management Week, October 2000.

This material has been reproduced with the permission of the copyright owner. Unauthorized reproduction of this material is strictly prohibited. For permission to reproduce this material, please contact PMI or any listed author.