

When project management meets international development, what can we learn?

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Call for papers

Special issue: When project management meets international development,
what can we learn?

Over the last decade, interest in project management has grown considerably (e.g. Söderlund, 2011). Indeed, by some accounts, 24% of the world GDP (\$19 trillion) is spent through projects every year (World Bank, 2015) and nearly 16 million new project management jobs are expected to be created globally by 2020 (PMI, 2013). Yet, while project management experiences a boom, gloom and doom performance often plague projects (Morris, 2013; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007). Not only do practitioners realize that projects are “cool” yet complex to manage (Grabher, 2002) but they often discover that the “iron law” has struck again, and, thus, that projects are often over budget, over time, over and over again (Flyvbjerg, 2014) or worse, that projects fail to deliver on their immediate objectives or their strategic goals (Matta and Ashkenas, 2003; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007).

For international development projects, those projects that are tasked with achieving the overarching goal of poverty reduction, the situation is, perhaps, even more challenging. Indeed, the well-known management paradox of getting things done by others becomes even a greater challenge in international development: helping others help themselves (Ellerman, 2005; Kowalski, 2006). Moreover, for 60 years, trillion of dollars have been spent on international development projects, often with little to show for it (Easterly, 2006) and a good number fail to deliver much needed impact for beneficiaries (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011; Ika, 2012; Munk, 2013). Thus, projects have so far failed to reach the Sachs’s (2005) beautiful goal of “making poverty history” (Easterly, 2006). By many accounts, the managerial explanations for international development project failures seem to be the same (Avots, 1969; Gow and Morss, 1988; Ika, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014). Thus, we can help if we could open the project management “black box” and learn how projects are actually carried out (Ika, 2015).

While both project management and international development date back to the 1950s, they represent pluralistic areas of knowledge at crossroads between specialization and fragmentation (Söderlund, 2011; Thomas, 2007). Both share a central

concern for change and heavily rely on projects as ubiquitous means to deliver either business or developmental change (Goldsmith, 1996; Ika and Hodgson, 2014; Morris, 2013; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007). Project management for its part, has grown from the narrow execution-oriented management of a single project where the focus is doing the project *right*, i.e., meeting time, cost, and quality, to a broader, more strategic, and complex management of projects where the focus is doing the *right* things, i.e., delivering benefits for stakeholders and end-users (Morris, 2013; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007; Williams and Samset, 2010). For decades, international development has dealt with relevant, global, contentious, fast-changing, complex or wicked challenges such as alleviating poverty, improving governance, building institutional capacity, promoting human rights, and adapting to climate change (e.g. Ramalingam, 2013). Interestingly, the project management field is more and more looking to address these big questions (e.g. the IRNOP 2015 panel debate with Peter Morris). In the “Age of Relevance” when issues related to strategy and the front-end of projects, and the links between projects, programmes, portfolios, policies, organizational, societal and global challenges are becoming more critical in managing projects (Morris, 2013, p. 269), it is timely to explore the affinity between project management and international development, two areas of knowledge which share an entrenched inclination towards a managerialist, technocratic, and instrumental way of managing (Ika and Hodgson, 2014). Indeed, project management and international development offer plenty of opportunities to learn, at the interface, from one another (Ika and Hodgson, 2014), in a true scholarship of integration (Boyer, 1990). We know that international development has contributed a wealth of knowledge to project management with logical frameworks, feasibility studies, cost-benefit analyses, evaluations, gender analysis of projects, and results-based management (Biggs and Smith, 2003; Golini et al., 2015; Ika, 2012). Moreover, project scholars have recently discovered that they owe to international development one of the main theoretical principles about project behavior and decision

making: Hirschman's (1967) "Hiding Hand" (Flyvbjerg, 2014; Ika and Söderlund, 2016). But there is much more to be learned at the interface of project management and international development.

We might learn *inter alia* that, in contrast to project management (Engwall, 2003), context has always mattered in international development, and that with their intangible goal of poverty alleviation, international development projects are fraught with multiple rationalities and points of views (Ika and Hodgson, 2014; Dar and Cooke, 2008). While strategy has always mattered in international development, strategic alignment and implementation are still the real challenge in the area (Easterly, 2006; Goldsmith, 1996; Hirschman, 1967). Thus, "doing the right things" and "doing things right" have long been on par in international development (Thomas, 2007) but only recently in project management (Williams and Samset, 2010). Furthermore, while complexity thinking is increasingly present in both international development (e.g. Ramalingam, 2013) and project management (e.g. Geraldi et al., 2011), the related idea of flexibility or adaptation (e.g. Shenhar and Dvir, 2007) has been a key concept in international development for more than 34 years (Rondinelli, 1983). The above speaks to the fertile cross-fertilization between project management and international development (Ika and Hodgson, 2014; Thomas, 2007). In light of such affinity, we ask: at the interface where project management meets international development, what can we learn? How could international development contribute to the theory and practice of project management? More specifically, we will focus on the following questions:

- 1) What makes international development projects specific, challenging, and complex to manage?
- 2) What is the state of the art of research on international development projects and their management?
- 3) What can we learn from international development projects for the study of other projects?
- 4) What theories of international development projects are the most suitable for the study of other projects?
- 5) How could international development contribute to theory and practice in managing projects?
- 6) What can the Making Projects Critical movement learn from international development critical scholarship?
- 7) What can we learn from international development projects for a gender analysis of other projects?

But we are open to any other related research questions as long as they shed light on what can be learned from international development projects.

As little has been done to bridge and compare theory and practice in project management and international development, the guest editors of this special issue hope to bring together scholars and practitioners from both areas to reflect on how project management can benefit from a better understanding of international development. In doing so, we draw on Boyer's (1990) scholarship of integration where researchers from different backgrounds get together and reflect on the connections

across different disciplines and advance knowledge through synthesis, and perhaps tackle pressing global challenges.

Finally, from a methodological perspective, we welcome both theoretical and empirical papers that would contribute significantly to project management theory and practice.

Guidelines for paper submission

If you are interested in the special issue, you may want to get in touch with the first guest editor, Lavagnon Ika, to ensure the suitability and relevance of the paper, and then submit your full manuscript by 22 June 2018. For author guidelines, please visit the website of the journal at: <https://www.elsevier.com/journals/international-journal-of-project-management/0263-7863/guide-for-authors>.

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