

KEYWORDS ■ international development projects ■ governance ■ flexibility

ABSTRACT

Although International Development Projects (IDPs) remain important instruments for activating and achieving sectoral and national development in the developing world, they often fall short of making their desired impact because they are implemented under challenging conditions with rigid procedures. This paper illustrates that flexibility is critical to the success of IDPs as it improves their effectiveness. It contributes to literature on IDPs and flexibility and is thus beneficial to IDP professionals, development organizations and the International Development Body of Knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

The financing and implementation of development activities through physical, economic and social investment projects has been an integral part of public planning and management in the developing world for a long time, and thus national ministries, international lending institutions and private corporations have used, and continue to use project management as a means of planning and executing billions of dollars of investments to stimulate economic growth in developing countries since World War II (Rondinelli, 1979). Procedures have evolved to ensure that such development projects are planned in detail; covenants, conditions precedent and procurement regulations continue to be inserted into legal contracts to compel acceptable behaviour (Strachan, 1978). The logical framework, which is hard to use within today's project management framework and integrate with other project management tools as a result of a few pitfalls (Couillard et. al, 2009), continues to be used to plan and imple-

Lawrence G. Boakye

Project Management Program,
School of Civil Engineering,
The University of Sydney, Australia
lboas200@uni.sydney.edu.au

Li Liu

Senior Lecturer,
School of Civil Engineering,
The University of Sydney, Australia
li.liu@sydney.edu.au

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ment such development interventions, all in attempts to ensure that they achieve their set objectives.

That notwithstanding, the record of development projects in the developing world has not being good - most of them simply fall far short of delivering their intended outputs and/or benefits in spite of their planning and management as well as several years of both individual and collective experience in managing projects. The Abyei Development Project in Sudan, having fallen far short of its objectives - both original and amended, was recommended for termination, and terminated it was (Barclay et. al, 1981); the Kpong Irrigation Project (KIP) in Ghana was terminated in 2004 after a schedule overrun of more than 90 months; and more recently, the Inland Valleys Rice Development Project (IVRDP) in Ghana was terminated in 2011 with many uncompleted civil works. In fact, one only has to do a cursory search to come across numerous examples of such projects that have failed. For some that succeed, their benefits are usually temporary and narrowly distributed (Rondinelli, 1979).

Owing to the nature of International Development Projects (IDPs), the difficult and unpredictable environment within which they are implemented and their path of identification through to implementation, they are almost always challenged. Moreover, the basics of interaction between financing institutions and the host government of IDPs make it difficult to apply good project management practices (Youker, 1999). These render the problems associated with managing IDPs such as unrealistic time-frames and budgets, scope changes, technically deficient designs, lack of appropriate and essential human and institutional capacities, to mention but a few, intractable.

Project planning, no matter how detailed it is, is done based on limited available information which

increases as the project progresses. IDPs turn out to be more complex than conventional projects with close interconnecting activities where a decision to undertake successive activities largely depends on the outcome of preceding ones. Projects are unique undertakings and as Andersen (1996) indicates, the natural implication of uniqueness is the impossibility to know all the activities required for a project to succeed at the initial planning stage. This very uniqueness is the characteristic that underpins the application of good project management principles in IDPs. Although there are instances where projects turn out to be complete failures due to their inability to produce actual benefits to the customer after being executed as planned, on time and on budget and achieve planned performance goals (Dvir et. al, 2003) the original plan, in too many IDPs, remains unchanged. This has become a common pitfall of IDPs.

This paper concludes that a flexible approach which allows for creative responses to opportunities, rather than rigid procedures, is critical to the governance of IDPs. By governance, the writer is referring to their method of management. Thus, governance and management may be used interchangeably in the paper. This paper is beneficial to IDP professionals, development organizations and the International Development Project Body of Knowledge.

1. Analysis of international development projects (IDPs)

By International Development Projects (IDPs), this paper is talking about government projects financed by institutions such as the World Bank; the

FLEXIBLE OR RIGID?

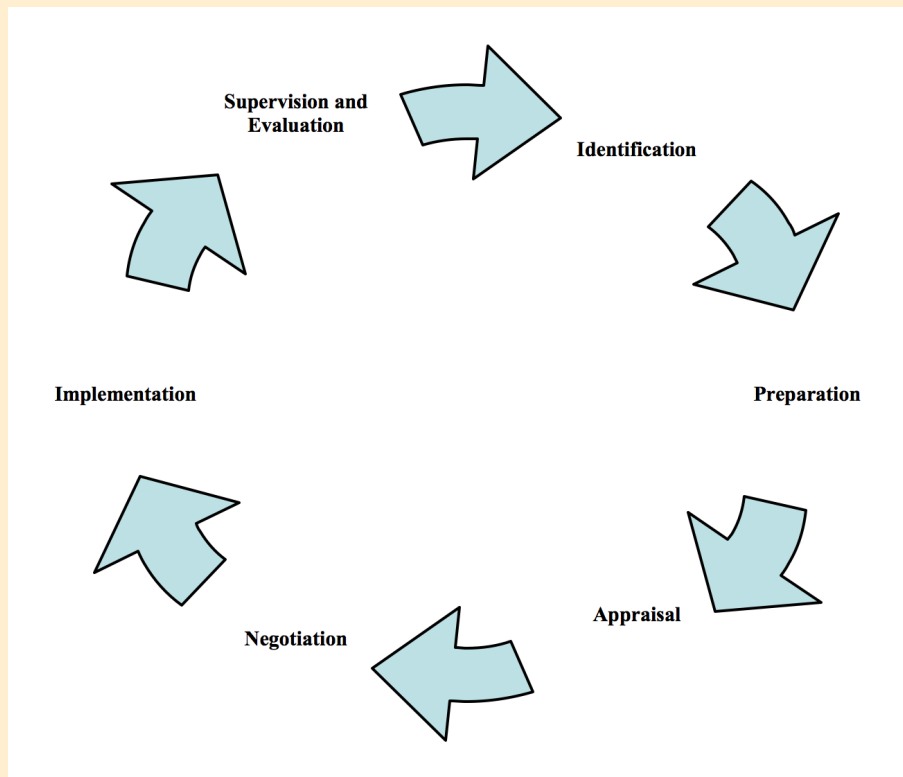


FIGURE 1. Project Cycle of International Development Projects (Baum, 1978)

Inter-American, African, Asian and Caribbean Development Banks; the Islamic Development Bank; and European Development Banks (Youker, 1999). They are public sector development projects or programs which are specifically designed for the economic and social needs of developing countries and are usually financed by a donor (Ahsan & Gunawan, 2010). Such projects are either implemented by recipient governments under a bilateral agreement with the donor country, or through an “implementing partner” of the donor which is frequently a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) or professional contractor (Crawford & Bryce, 2003). IDPs are important instruments for initiating and attaining both national and sectoral development. Billions of dollars are available each year via donor countries, development banks and international institutions for developmental purposes in the developing world. Their importance to the developing world cannot be over-emphasized. For instance, in the mid-2000s, activities of the Ghana Poverty Reduction Project, an African Development Bank (AfDB)-funded project led to an increase in

the household income of pineapple growers on the project from GHs17.60/month to GHs95.00/month (AfDB, 2006a). And more recently, activities of the Livestock Development Project (LDP), implemented in Ghana between 2003 and 2011, led to an increase in the average annual gross revenue per smallholder farmer from a baseline of GHs25,939.94 to GHs49,700.00 and from GHs1,144.41 to GHs3,420.00 for cattle and sheep farmers respectively (AfDBa).

IDPs differ from conventional projects as a result of their unique characteristics. Due to the cross-functional nature of project activities, projects often typically comprise a degree of complexity that is not found within other functional departments (Kharbanda & Pinto, 1996). However, IDPs are found to be more complex than other type of projects because they are implemented in highly difficult and unpredictable environments where, as Youker (2003) indicates, there is often a lack of basic infrastructure and all resources are in short supply. Then again, they are mostly not-for-profit with an involvement of several multiple stakeholders. Language barriers, cross-cultural

gaps and geographical distances among the stakeholders may hamper their smooth implementation (Freedman & Katz, 2007). Their process of identification and development is often solely carried out by the donor or financing institution, resulting in local stakeholders feeling left out (Youker, 1999).

They are somewhat experimental and thus even seemingly routine replications are likely to meet unanticipated difficulties when transferred from one cultural setting to another (Rondinelli, 1979). Although there are some hard elements within IDPs, they are frequently concerned with soft issues like social or human development (Crawford & Bryce, 2003). More and more IDPs have turned out to be soft type projects involving social services dealing with people, versus construction in sectors such as education and even revising government pension programmes (Youker, 1999). The soft objectives of these projects are usually less visible and measurable compared to industrial or commercial projects (Ahsan & Gunawan, 2010). IDPs have thus turned out to be difficult projects to manage (Youker, 1999). They have also been found to be difficult to plan which is evident in technically deficient designs, scope changes as well as cost and time overruns, often reported as some of the major pitfalls of IDPs. This difficulty in managing them is aggravated by the fact that:

- There is a lack of appropriate and essential human and institutional capacities in developing countries for their management.
- It is impossible to anticipate all activities required for an IDP to succeed during planning.
- During their governance, a decision to undertake an activity largely depends on the outcome of a preceding activity or activities.

The life cycle, stages linking the start to the end, of IDPs consists of a number of progressive phases that lead, from the identification of needs and objectives through the planning and implementation of activities in order to address these needs and objectives, to the assessment of the outcomes (Biggs & Smith, 2003). Baum (1978) introduced a specific six progressive-phase life cycle of IDPs (Figure 1). The majority of development agencies such as European Commission (EC), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) have a project cycle of five or six phases, very similar to Baum's but with differences in content and in the names of the phases (Golini & Landoni, 2013).

The Logical Framework Approach (LFA) is typically used to manage IDPs. It is a tool for planning programmes and projects in the broader context of development goals which consists of a four-by-four matrix summarising the most important aspects of a project/programme under consideration (Baur, 2001). Its four columns are usually Narrative Summary, Objectively Verifiable Indicators, Means of Verification and Assumptions and the four rows/lines consist of Goal, Purpose, Outputs and Inputs (Couillard et. al, 2009).

The LFA is now considered inflexible, complex and difficult to integrate with other project management tools due to the lack of a clear process leading to its development, its confusing nature is evident in the difference between goal and purpose and a lack of stakeholders' involvement which often compromise its validity [(Couillard et. al, 2009); (Coleman, 1987); (Solem, 1987)]. As a result, updated tools such as the Logical Framework Approach - Millennium [see (Couillard et. al, 2009)] have been proposed. Development agencies such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and CIDA also no longer use it (Golini & Landoni, 2013).

As illustrated above and as Youker (2003) indicates, IDPs are different from other types of projects for many reasons and thus the approach to their implementation must also be different. There is therefore the need, not for rigid implementation procedures for their governance, but rather a flexible approach which will allow for creative responses to opportunities that might not have been anticipated during the identification and development process.

2. Research method

The methodology similar to that of Olsson (2004) was employed for this research. This paper is primarily based on secondary data. Findings and conclusion are based on an extensive review of Project Completion Reports (PCRs) and Project Evaluation Reports (PERs) of AfDB-funded projects across various sectors in Ghana, archived and available on the Bank's website for public access. Archived project reports are credible sources for research as the data sourced from them are more objective than primary survey data because they are free from contamination by respondent perceptions and/or memories of the phenomenon of interest (Calantone & Vickery, 2009).

The findings and conclusion are also based on extant literature on flexibility and influenced by

one of the authors' personal experience working on IDPs as well as observing how they are implemented in Ghana. The paper is mainly qualitative in nature.

3. An overview of flexibility

Flexibility can be said to be the ability to adapt investment decisions, including timing and scale, to existing market conditions as opposed to pre-set assumptions and goals (<http://www.businessdictionary.com>) or the capacity to adapt in simpler terms (Golden & Powell, 2000). It may also be described as a way of making irreversible decisions more reversible or postponing irreversible decisions until more information is available (N. O. Olsson, 2004).

Flexibility approach could be of two forms in a project – process flexibility and product flexibility. Process flexibility, which is associated with adaptability in decision making in projects, is a means of responding to uncertainty. An example is the “last responsive moment” approach as illustrated by Ballard & Howell (2003) where decisions are not taken until the very last responsive moment. Product flexibility, on the other hand, is associated with adaptability in the use of project deliverables. According to Golden & Powell (2000), the literature proposes numerous standpoints from which to measure flexibility with four metrics viz. efficiency, responsiveness, versatility and robustness emerging.

4. Findings and discussion

All IDPs are somewhat experimental and even such seemingly routine replications often meet unanticipated difficulties when transferred from one cultural setting to another (Rondinelli, 1979). As such, as indicated by Youker (1999), although good project management if started early in the project development process could solve most of the problems associated with IDPs, it is difficult to do so owing to the basics of the interaction between the financing institution and the host government – the process of identification and development is often solely done by the financing institution. These have led and continue to lead to one common recurring IDP pitfall which is long lead time to get the project rolled out. For example, it took the KIP, the Small Scale Irrigation Development Project (SSIDP) and the IVRDP,

all of which were implemented in Ghana, 55, 40 and 37 months respectively to get started after approval [see (AfDB, 2005); (AfDBc); (AfDBb)]. This long lead time leads IDPs with no option other than an update of the project concept and design before implementation which is almost never done. Another effect of the basics of interaction is the implementation problems synonymous to IDP governance which arise because different people, other than those who design and plan the projects, end up implementing the projects. These, as well as other problems are compounded by the dynamic and unpredictable nature of the environment as well as the lack of appropriate and essential human & institutional capacities in project management in the developing world.

Project planning provides structure, reduces uncertainty and increases the likelihood of success (Dvir et. al, 2003) but the chances of realizing a plan without amendments decrease with increasing time horizon (Olsson, 2006). It is also virtually impossible to anticipate all activities required for an IDP to succeed during planning. Moreover, IDPs tend to have several closely linked phases (*e.g. construction works are linked to training, formation of users associations and provision of inputs and credit*) with a decision to undertake a successive activity often dependent on the outcome of the preceding one. These have rendered most IDPs less effective. At least, AfDB's projects have been found to be less effective as they are good at delivering outputs but weak in translating the outputs into outcomes and impact (AfDB, 2011), which explains the call for modifying the existing Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBok) in the management of IDPs [see, for example, (Do Ba & Tun Lin, 2008)]. Flexibility is primarily an approach to improve the effectiveness of projects and is thus the factor that could fit well in the effectiveness of IDPs (Shahu et. al, 2012). Shahu et al. (2012) conducted an empirical study on flexibility as a critical success factor for projects and found that the cost of its application is much lower than the cost of managing unexpected changes in the course of project delivery. That same study revealed that projects which had a scope of flexibility in process, decision making, design, etc. showed higher levels of success rates as compared to those with rigid systems. They therefore concluded that its application could be seen as a value addition to projects through an improvement of the overall project effectiveness and beneficiary satisfaction. This explains the desire of project owners and users to have “room for manoeuvring” so as to be able to adjust projects as

they gain knowledge about their needs and changes in the project context (Midler, 1995).

A review of reports of AfDB's IDPs in Ghana offers some clear insights on the need for a flexible approach to managing IDPs. The review identifies the lack of project flexibility as a major cause of failure for the Bank's projects. One report indicates inflexible and cumbersome procedures as major sources of implementation delays (AfDB, 2011) with an informal note (AfDB, 2006b) indicating projects should ensure more inbuilt flexibility during implementation for satisfactory outcome. The LDP by exercising flexible decision making approach during project implementation, minimised losses through a change from a conventional cash credit scheme to a credit-in-kind scheme using small ruminants when it discovered that the recovery rate for the disbursed loans under the cash credit scheme was low (AfDBa). Similarly, the Second Line of Credit to Agricultural Development Bank (AgDB), disbursed in the form of a project to boost overall agricultural production in Ghana, succeeded in attaining its objectives with a flexible approach. The PCR (AfDB, 1997) states that flexibility which “allowed the African Development Fund (ADF) to enable the AgDB to revise the list of goods and services in line with the actual demand for credit was an important factor for the achievement of the objectives of the project.” (p. 17).

A classical case of the need for a flexible approach in IDPs can be seen from the KIP which was considered a failed operation and terminated by the AfDB after several years of implementation only to get its fortunes turned around by a private company (AfDB, 2005) through product flexibility. Thus says the report:

“In Ghana, the transformation of a failed operation (KIP) into a success story through the use of infrastructure for a high-value crop by a private company illustrates the need for the Bank to have a more open and flexible approach on the finality of the infrastructure.” (Page 18)

A flexible managerial approach is not a new concept as Olsson (2004) reports. Several examples of flexibility as a readiness approach to the effects of uncertainty in planning have been identified by researchers such as Sager (1990). In spite of the usefulness of flexibility in improving project effective-

ness, it seems to be a paradox that mainstream project management focuses on stability for the project whilst major parts of other management disciplines strongly emphasise flexibility (Olsson, 2004). It is traditionally described as undesirable in project management context (Shahu et. al, 2012). The case against flexibility stems from project efficiency. The argument is that once a project has been decided upon and the planning and execution has begun, changes will not only generate disagreements between the different project actors but it will often reduce the project's efficiency (Olsson, 2004). This case clearly neglects the projects' effectiveness aspect. However, the traditional focus on stability in project management becomes challenged under uncertainty (Kreiner, 1995) which calls for the need of flexibility. There is therefore a dilemma in its application as a result of these arguments. But of what use is an efficiently delivered project which is rendered effective because it cannot make the desired impact or produce the desired revenue?

5. Conclusion

Projects will remain the dominant means of organizing investment in the foreseeable future because they offer important advantages (Rondinelli, 1979). IDPs will therefore continue to be a major way of activating and attaining development in the developing world irrespective of the numerous challenges associated with their governance and their continuously reported failures. That notwithstanding, owing to their path of identification and development as well as the usage of the deficient logical framework for their planning and management, IDPs will continue to be difficult and challenge endeavours undertaken in a developing world characterized by a lack of adequate and diminishing resources. A likely effect of this is a continuous failure of these projects in the foreseeable future. Failure in itself is good in that we learn by failing. However, the cost of learning from the failure of development projects is painfully high. And thus, one inexpensive way of learning how best to manage IDPs is through studies of this nature.

IDPs are again complex activities with higher levels of uncertainty and are thus beset with several problems during their management. It is virtually impossible to anticipate all the required activities necessary to enable them to succeed. There is also no guarantee that all planned activities will be executed to the latter during implementation. And as indicated by Siffin (1979), a development project is not like a train trip to a ticketed destination; rather

it is more like sailing on a ship, hopefully beyond the point where the internal rate of return becomes favourable, in the direction of a better and more generously endowed climate. There is thus the need for modifications to be made to suit prevailing conditions as they progress and more information becomes available. This paper has illustrated that the one factor suitable for such a modification is flexibility. It is thus illuminating and provides a basis to generate further research. The paper is beneficial to IDP professionals, development organizations and the International Development Project Body of Knowledge.



■ **Li Liu** PhD, is Senior Lecturer in Project Management at the University of Sydney (USYD). He has his PhD degree from the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM). He also has a Master's degree in Taxation from USYD, a MBA, and a BE. Dr. Liu has one decade of working experience in systems engineering, project management, business research, management consulting, and managing an e-commerce company. He has been published in many international journals including: IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management, Project Management Journal, Journal of Information Technology (JIT), International Journal of Project Management, and Construction Management & Economics (CME). Dr. Liu has presented at INSEAD and a number of international conferences, including Project Management Institute (PMI®) Research Conferences and the International Conference for Information Systems. He has served as a reviewer for a number of journals and conferences, including MIS Quarterly, JIT, Construction Management & Economics, International Conference for Information Systems, European Conference for Information Systems (ECIS), and the PMI Research Conference. Dr. Liu has been serving as a senior editor for Journal of Information Technology. His research focuses on the performance of infrastructure projects, organizational project management, organizational learning in project organizations, IT/IS project management, organizational control theory, and project/program governance. Development.



■ **Lawrence Boakye** holds a BSc (Hons) Degree in Agriculture from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana. Having worked with the Inland Valleys Rice Development Project (a defunct African Development Bank-funded project) and having had brief stints, during his undergraduate studies, with the Brong Ahafo Region Development Programme of Action-Aid Ghana as well as the Kintampo-South District and the Fanteakwa District Area Development Programmes of World Vision Ghana, he has quite an appreciable level of experience in development work. He is currently in his final year of his MPhil candidature with the Project Management Program at The University of Sydney, Australia on the Australia Awards Scholarship programme and seeks a scholarship to pursue doctorate studies. His research interests are in International Development Projects (IDPs) and why they fail. His goal is to contribute to the interchange of ideas between academia and the development project world so that academic research can have practical outcomes, thereby helping the developing world adopt good managerial approaches in the delivery of development projects.

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