Managing International Development Projects: Lessons Learned

By Robert Youker

This article will discuss lessons learned in managing the implementation of international development projects. First we will define the type of projects we are talking about. Then we will discuss the types of problems commonly encountered on international projects and finally we will compare that list of problems with a similar list from the United States. The basic conclusion is that the problems are almost exactly the same and that the solution is to learn the basics lessons of good project management and to apply them in the specific context of each specific project.

By international projects we are talking about government projects financed by institutions such as the World Bank, the Inter-American, African, Asian and Caribbean Development Banks, and the Islamic Development Bank and European Development Banks. Originally these institutions financed infra-structure construction type projects with international engineering firms and international construction companies managing the implementation. These “hard” type enclave projects were generally not a problem in implementation particularly with expert management.

In recent years however more and more of the projects financed by these institutions 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 programs. Management was done by inexperienced local institutions rather than experienced foreign contractors and consultants. These turned out to be very difficult projects to manage and many problems (and lessons) unfolded.

The World Bank and the host country prepare detailed ex-post evaluations of all projects financed by the World Bank. Reports of these evaluations are published every year for learning inside and outside the Bank. The following is a list of selected problems gleaned over the years from those ex-post evaluation reports: (1)

- Lack of a shared perception and agreement on the objectives of the project by staff and stakeholders.
- Lack of commitment to the project by the team, management and stakeholders.
- Lack of detailed, realistic and current project plans (schedule, budget, procurement)
- Unclear lines of authority and responsibility (organization not structured for PM)
- Lack of adequate resources
- Poor feedback and control mechanisms for early detection of problems
- Poor or no analysis of major risk factors
- Delays caused by bureaucratic administrative systems (approvals, procurement, personnel, land acquisition, and release of funds)

Most of these problems could be solved by good project management, started early in the project development process. But the basics of the interaction between the financing institution and the host government makes it difficult to apply good project
management. The financing institution is often times solely involved in the process of project identification and development with the result the local stakeholders feel left out.

The World Bank often requires the host government to set up a project implementation unit which is a matrix organization. However they give the local authorities no information or help on what is necessary to make the difficult matrix organization work. The poor local project manager is left with full responsibility and very little authority over the resources he/she needs to implement the project. Finally the government and personnel are reluctant to set up a project manager until the foreign funding is completely approved, meaning a year or more time may be lost during which local advanced planning could have been started.

Now let’s look at problems in project management from the United States. The following list was prepared by Hans Thamhain and David Wilemon, two well-known PM researchers in the United States (1): (Not all problems are included)

- Communications problems
- Conflict between team and support organizations
- Different objectives among stakeholders
- Insufficient resources
- Insufficient rewards and lack of interest in the project
- Lack of senior management interest and support
- Lack of team member commitment
- Poor personnel selection
- Unstable project environment

We can see that the two lists of problems are very similar. The lessons for effective project implementation are the same. We need detailed cooperative planning with all of the key stakeholders. The project manager needs the necessary control over the required resources necessary to complete the plan. The planning needs to create order out of chaos.

Why the lessons are not followed is the $64,000 question. The answer probably very much relates to the nature of the culture and the reward systems of the two bureaucracies involved.

(1) These two lists are contained in the CD ROM Instructors Resource Kit for Managing the Implementation of Development Projects prepared by the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank. The World Bank has made the entire five week training program available free on the internet at the following URL: https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/13630
About the Author

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Robert Youker is an independent trainer and consultant in Project Management with more than forty years of experience in the field. He is retired from the World Bank where he developed and presented six week project management training courses for the managers of major projects in many different countries. He served as the technical author for the bank on the Instructors Resource Kit on CD ROM for a five week training course on Managing the Implementation of Development Projects. He has written and presented more than a dozen papers at the Project Management Institute and the International Project Management Association (Europe) conferences many of which have been reprinted in the Project Management Institute publications and the International Journal of Project Management (UK).

Mr. Youker is a graduate of Colgate University, the Harvard Business School and studied for a doctorate in behavioral science at George Washington University. His project management experience includes new product development at Xerox Corporation and project management consulting for many companies as President of Planalog Management Systems from 1968 to 1975. He has taught in Project Management Courses for AMA, AMR, AED, ILI, ILO, UCLA, University of Wisconsin, George Washington University, the Asian Development Bank and many other organizations. He developed and presented the first Project Management courses in Pakistan, Turkey, China and Africa for the World Bank.

A few years ago Mr. Youker conducted Project Management training in Amman, Jordan financed by the European Union for 75 high level civil servants from Iraq who implemented the first four World Bank projects in Iraq. He is a former Director of PMI, IPMA and asapm, the USA member organization of IPMA. Most recently he has been consulting for the US Government Millennium Challenge Corporation on project management training in Africa. Bob can be contacted at bobyouker@att.net