Review

Implementation challenges of a donor funded development project: Lessons learned through a deep-end strategy while implementing a development program in Zambia

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Several authors have noted that despite the huge volume of international aid supporting development projects, there is a chronic litany of challenges threatening the effectiveness of development projects. Most donor funded projects require project teams to produce and disseminate monitoring and evaluation reports for purposes of informing stakeholders of project achievements and challenges. Unfortunately, such project reports do not include some of the experiences from which lessons could be learned to inform decisions for effective implementation of future projects. There is, therefore, need for project teams to find and use other ways of sharing their experiences. This article is a case study in form of an emic account of the challenges of implementing a donor funded development program in an African country. The case study is given as a summary of lessons learned through the experience of coordinating a $60 million program from inception to closure.

Key words: Policy, development, programme management, donor aid.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the subject of international development projects has received considerable attention from scholars and development practitioners because of the problems associated with development projects (see for instance Youker, 1999; Kwak, 2002; Khang & Moe, 2008; Ika, Diallo & Thuillier, 2010; Leiderer, 2012). International development projects, as Kwak (2002) observed, have tended to pose special problems for project managers and have also been criticized for denying recipients of aid the ownership of the development process (Leiderer, 2012).

One probable reason why the subject of international development projects has remained on the agenda for decades (despite the emergence of other forms of aid modalities such as budget support and aid on delivery) may lie in the fact that some donors still prefer project based aid because of the fungibility issues associated with alternative aid modalities and because project aid enables the donor to have more say in work plans and budgets. For such donors, much as they are alive to the disadvantages of projects, a break from the traditional project-based support is akin to throwing away the baby with the bath water.

They would rather listen to the weaknesses of development projects and draw lessons for purposes of improving future strategies for implementing successful projects. Some of the lessons to be learned may not be found in monitoring reports and consultants’ evaluation reports. They may only be found in the personal accounts of project personnel in recipient countries who have
stories to tell based on their lived experiences.

**Literature Review**

Development aid has a long history, which to some extent can be traced to the nineteenth century (Hjertholm & White, 2000; Kanbur, 2003; McKinlay, 1978). In recent years, the major premise for development aid has been that local resources alone can have little impact on poverty alleviation and it is only with external aid that developing countries can make the desired progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. According to the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP’s) Human Development Report (2011), official development assistance (ODA) has increased by 35% since 2004. By 2011, annual ODA stood at US$100 billion. In spite of this huge volume of development aid, the literature on donor funded development projects and programs continues to cite some challenges threatening achievement of intended goals (see for instance Diallo & Thuiller, 2004; Gow & Morss, 1988; and Kwak, 2002).

Some of the challenges of development projects are that they are neither effective nor efficient and they do not promote recipient countries’ ownership of development processes. Leiderer (2012) summarizes the weaknesses of isolated development projects as follows:

- Projects involve high transaction costs,
- Projects are predominantly supply-driven (following donor rather than recipient priorities) and tend to generate little ownership for development processes on the recipient side,
- Projects undermine recipients’ own administrative and political capacities by establishing parallel systems for managing aid resources, and
- Projects produce only temporally and locally confined effects with little impact on structural and systemic challenges in developing countries.

As a result of these and many other weaknesses, donors have considered some alternative modalities of financing international development programs. According to Alvarez (2010):

> The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005), the European Consensus on Development (2006) and the ACCRA Agenda for Action (2008) have clearly driven the shift towards budget support by enjoining donors to channel aid through recipient country systems. (p.2)

Using this new modality of funding, the European Commission’s commitments to aid more than doubled in the period 2000-2004, reaching a level of 21% of new European Development Fund commitments (Schmidt, 2006). In the United Kingdom’s 2010-2011 budget cycle, budget support amounted to £644 million, representing 15% of the UK’s bilateral aid budget (Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 2012). The shift from projects to budget support is based on a number of assumptions, the main one being that it counters the weaknesses of the project-based approach to development aid. Some reports have noted some positive trends in the implementation of the budget support approach. For instance, Caputo, de Kemp and Lawson (2011) have reported that this approach has contributed to increasing the recipient countries’ control on development funds. Most recently, Bakoup (2013) has reported that from its inception in the 1980s, budget support has been known to have made a positive impact on some key determinants of aid effectiveness in general, such as harmonization, aid alignment, ownership, transparency, mutual accountability, and reduction of transaction costs. There has, however, been a call to caution against putting undue faith in budget support (Schmidt, 2006; Alvarez, 2010; Leiderer, 2012). Schmidt (ibid) sums up this caution clearly:

> Provision of budget support is a contentious issue in the international debate on development cooperation (DC). While its proponents argue that the departure from the project-based approaches of the past has served to boost ownership and improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and significance of DC, its critics point to the high risks involved in providing budget support. In view of inadequate public financial management (PFM) systems in most recipient countries, they note, it is impossible to rule out substantial misuse or misappropriation of DC funds. (p.1)

With this caution against taking budget support as a panacea to problems of development funding, it is little wonder that the subject of international development projects has remained current in the discourse of international development programs. There is still need to continue collecting and analyzing lessons learned from the implementation of development projects. The sources of the lessons should be broadened to cover not just the project reports because it can be argued that project reports are not telling the whole story despite the fact that one aim of project reports is to maintain and disseminate monitoring and evaluation information, the purpose of which includes improvement in planning and implementation of development assistance, effectiveness of management decisions, learning from experience, joint planning and programming, accountability and response to reporting requirements (Booth, Ebrahim, & Morin, 1998).

Perhaps monitoring and evaluation reports are not a likely source of some of the project experiences concerning the day-to-day happenings of a project from which some important lessons can be drawn for use in subsequent projects. Such reports are not likely to contain the
lived experiences of project team members as Schindler and Eppler (2003) observed:

Experiences—which are by definition bound to the people who are personally involved in the corresponding problem solving processes—are often not a part of a project’s documentation and they are seldom transferred to other people during the course of a project. Project team members return to their line functions (or they are being moved into other functions) after having completed their tasks in the project and they usually take their new experiences with them. These experiences are then only accessible through informal networks. (p219)

Background

When teaching a person how to swim, the instructor may begin by explaining the ABC of swimming to the learner and then help the learner float in shallow water. After confidence has been gained by the learner, he or she may be encouraged to venture into the deep end of the pool.

However, the instructor has the option of applying a different strategy: pushing the learner into the deep end of the pool as the first step in the learning process and watching the learner acquire the ABC of swimming as he struggles not to sink. In applied linguistics, this teaching methodology has been referred to as the deep-end strategy (Johnson, 1982).

The deep-end strategy is what the Ministry of Science, Technology and Vocational Training (MSTVT) in Zambia applied in the process of learning how to manage its Technical Education, Vocational and Entrepreneurship Training (TEVET) Development Programme (TDP) from 2001 to 2008.

The TDP was a $60 million dollar programme funded by a consortium of donors (including the host Government) to benefit over three hundred organizations in the following eight different aspects:

1. Organization and Management of TEVET;
2. Training Systems;
3. Human Resource Development;
4. Entrepreneurship and Informal Sector Training;
5. TEVET Information System;
6. Crossing Cutting Issues (Gender, HIV/AIDS, Disabilities, Environment);
7. Infrastructure and Equipment;
8. TEVET Financing.

The beneficiaries comprised Government departments, training institutions and the national training authority. The programme was coordinated by officials from the MSTVT and from the national TEVET authority (TEVETA).

Mid way through the life of the TDP, it was rated a programme at risk doomed to fail. It seemed to maintain its poor rating up to the end of the fourth year. The issues affecting the poor rating were as follows:

Delayed action by Government to meet the following agreed targets:
1. Amending the TEVET Act of 1998;
2. Establishing a TEVET Fund;
3. Introducing a TEVET Levy;

Slow disbursement of funds, caused largely by:
4. Delays in starting physical infrastructural development, to which large sums of money were tied;
5. Delays in approval of annual work plans and budgets (AWPB) arising from insistence by partners earlier in the program that approval was dependent on release of national budget (this was aggravated by the mismatch between project budget cycle and national budget cycle);

As a result of the program’s teething problems, it was given an additional two years after the initial end date. During those last two years, the TDP moved from being a program at risk to a successful one.

This is not a testimony of miraculous healing. It is a case of an organization taking on the task of managing a huge and complex programme without prior training in the skill of designing and rolling out a programme. The poor rating was a reflection of the little amount of preparedness for participation in the programme by coordinators, implementers and beneficiaries. The programme recovery, on the other hand, was a sign of the tremendous amount of survival instinct-based learning that took place in the wilderness.

This discussion paper is an account of the programme management lessons learned from the experience of participating in the TDP without prior adequate training in the challenges of the task.

The lessons

Programme design can make or break a project

The Ministry learned that project design can have a critical contribution to the success or failure of a project. The simpler the project is the simpler will its implementation be. The design of the TDP was a great challenge to managers, implementers and beneficiaries.

To exemplify its complexity, the TDP was designed to have the following structure:

a) Steering Committee comprising government ministries involved in TEVET, donors supporting the sector, and the TEVET Authority (TEVETA). The Committee was chaired by the Permanent Secretary of the host ministry. The role of the Steering Committee was to provide strategic guidance and to approve budgets;
b) Programme Coordinating Office comprising Programme Coordinator and specialists in monitoring and evaluation, financial management, and procurement. This was the secretariat for the programme, mandated to provide day-to-day coordination of the TDP;
c) Component coordinators comprising line officers in the host ministry. Their role was to develop component work plans and budgets and prepare reports on the progress of components;
d) Programme Coordinating Team comprising component coordinators. The main function of the team was to provide a forum for harmonizing activities of different components;
e) Programme Implementers comprising chief executives of beneficiary institutions (TEVETA, government departments and training institutions). The implementers' role was to apply for support from the TDP, ensure that support was in accordance with the TDP work plan and budget, and submit progress reports to the host ministry.

One problem that caused the TDP a lot of damage was lack of role clarity in the minds of many people involved in the programme. The Programme Implementation Plan (PIP) and the Program Operational Manual stipulated the roles and functions of the different players. However, the difference between component coordinators and implementers was not appreciated. Furthermore, the role of the Programme Coordinating Office was not perceived to be different from that of implementers. As a result, the programme experienced a number of conflicts that affected the speed of delivery of outputs.

Another difficulty arising from the design of the TDP was the number and nature of components. The components were based on all the eight aspects of the TEVET policy. The aim of including all the eight components was to ensure that funds were available for investment into the implementation of the entire policy. However, as it turned out each of the components could be a huge stand-alone project.

A further design issue was that of scope. The TDP covered a lot of beneficiary institutions such that the spread of resources was too thin to make any significant impact as intended.

Having gone through all the design-related challenges, the Ministry came to learn the hard way the KISS maxim that experts in project design have been stressing on project management courses, namely: Keep it Simple, Stupid (Strazzari and Trevallion, 2001; Stukenbruck and Zomorrodian, 1987).

**Multiplicity of donors can make or break a project**

The TDP had the following donors:

1. The World Bank;
2. The Royal Netherlands Embassy;
3. The Royal Danish Embassy;
4. The European Union;
5. The Japanese International Agency;
6. The German Society for Technical Cooperation (GTZ);
and
7. The Zambian Government.

On the question of external donor aid, one common trap in development assistance is that of poor coordination of external aid. For example, the Congressional Budget Office (1997) noted that:

“Development assistance received from multiple sources may create problems of administration and coordination in a recipient country and thereby undermine the effectiveness of aid. When donors approach a government with a proposed development project, the recipient country may agree to the project without integrating it into a comprehensive development framework. The lowest-income countries may not even have such a framework or may be so desperate for foreign assistance that they seldom refuse aid or challenge a donor's approach. That makes it possible for different donors to start contradictory programs or for multiple donors to duplicate projects, reducing the overall effectiveness of the assistance” (p 37).

This problem of coordination of multiple donors was minimized by the following measures in the case of the TDP:

1. The preparation of a programme document by the host ministry, in which the TEVET investment priorities of the Zambian Government were outlined: The donors were asked to buy into a government programme;
2. The establishment of a Steering Committee bringing together all the donors to make joint decisions on the programme;
3. Government’s decision to take leadership of the programme.

However, these measures were not sufficient to protect the TDP from all the problems associated with multiple donors. Despite having a common document of priorities and management guidelines, some donors preferred to do things their own way (perhaps by force of cultural inclinations) while still championing a common front. Some donors, for example, preferred direct support to the beneficiary institutions instead of utilizing the common pool. Furthermore, nearly every donor demanded a donor-specific reporting format. As a result, preparation of unified progress reports became a challenge.

At one point, the attempt by the host ministry to reassert its leadership by demanding timely reports on the flow of funds that were outside the pool led to a very serious conflict with one donor (who suspended aid as a result of this). The conflict with one donor led to a dent on the Ministry's relationship with the rest of the donors.

The Ministry learned something from this experience. The lesson was that partnership with multiple donors can
be tricky. Like in a polygamous marriage, you cannot please all partners at all times because of their differences in individual choices and cultural backgrounds.

Balance of power between donor and host can make or break a project:

The issue of suspended support mentioned above brought to the fore an important lesson. A host ministry may be in what seems to be the driver’s seat of a project, but the real power in project governance could very easily be lost to the financiers.

The old adage that he who pays the piper calls the tune is as true now as it was at the beginning of time. Partners seemed to be fully alert to this adage each time there appeared to be a difference between host and donors in perception of what was best for the project. The lesson from this experience seemed to be that the host ministry may only exercise project leadership to the full if the consequences do not matter, or if the host is making the largest contribution to the project budget to the extent that the other partners’ individual contributions are insignificant.

Having project personnel across command lines can make or break a project

The home of the TEVET Development Programme was the department of vocational education and training (VET), since the programme was a VET issue. However, the programme was so huge that it was not able to sit in one ministerial department. Some major components of the programme rested in other departments of the ministry. For example, the Human Resource Development component was coordinated from the department of Human Resources and Administration while the Infrastructure Development and Equipment Supply component was coordinated from the Planning and Development Department.

The spreading of project functions across different departments taught the ministry the hard way some practical realities of turfism. Some heads of department seemed to resent what appeared to them as interference from another department. The result was that some requests for data from the coordinating office were interpreted as territorial affronts. This led to some catastrophic delays in the delivery of outputs. It also led to silent interdepartmental wars which affected project goals. Stone (2004) could not have expressed the realities of turfism more succinctly when she observed that:

...feuding may create serious problems. Excessive competition can have one manager backstabbing another, hoarding information, focusing on his or her needs at the expense of the bigger picture, and ignoring the facts that don’t support his or her viewpoint. Process obsession can create a “not-invented-here” mentality that overrides the productivity or productivity improvements that might come with implementation in another way (p.12).

Changes in leaders can make or break a project

In seven years from project appraisal to project completion stage, the TDP experienced the following changes in leadership:

1. Ministers: eight reshuffles;
2. Permanent Secretaries: seven changes;
3. Four World Bank Task Team Leaders;
4. Four representatives from the Royal Danish Embassy;
5. Two representatives from the Royal Netherlands Embassy.

Needless to say, every change had an impact on the TDP. This rate of turn-over of political and strategic leaders was too high when compared with the turn-over of leaders of successful educational systems. In their report entitled “How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better”, Mourshed et al. (2010) have said: “Looking across our 20 improving systems, the median tenure of strategic leaders is six years while that of political leaders is seven years” (p 107).

However, responsibility for these changes, much as they impacted on the programme, lay in authorities far removed from the project. The lesson learned was that some factors influencing behavior of a project lie beyond the project environment, although project staff takes the blame for the adverse impact.

Rules can make or break a project

In the first two years of the TDP, speed of implementation was largely blamed on the inflexible rules cast in the Operations Manual. Procurement procedures, especially, were seen to be one major source of delays in delivery of services. From the time that beneficiary institutions requested for training equipment, a period of more than two years elapsed before the goods arrived. In some instances, situations on the ground had changed by the time the goods arrived.

In one component, award of contract to a consultant was annulled by a donor because of a perceived breach of rules. Although the highest tender authority in the country agreed with the ministry that the rule concerning the selection of that consultant was not broken, nothing could be done about that because the one paying the piper had called a tune different from that of the ministry.

Within the ministry as was the case among beneficiaries, there was a misconception that all programme funds were sitting in the programme account to be spent when and as needed. In spite of the existence of a manual outlining the rules and procedures for the flow of
funds, the misconception persisted. Furthermore, some beneficiaries ignored the fact that the rules of the programme had stipulated that during the first year, procurement was going to be centralized (to be done by Programme Coordinating Office) while beneficiaries (including TEVETA) were building their capacities to handle their own procurement and financial management. This planned delay in decentralizing the management of funds by beneficiaries frustrated some of the beneficiaries, particularly TEVETA.

Rules of the programme caused a situation of frustration among all concerned. Beneficiary institutions got frustrated by the long delays in the delivery of programme services; donors got frustrated by the snail’s pace of programme outputs, ministry staff were frustrated by the dogmatic approach that some partners took to rules.

Out of this, the ministry learned that manuals are living documents to be amended in the light of experience.

**Group dynamics can make or break a project**

The TEVET Development Programme popularized a new culture of work in the ministry, the culture of group work. Nearly all activities needed to be done in working groups. However, the high incidence of team tasks brought along some challenges relating to realities of group dynamics, particularly concerning interaction between some staff in TEVETA and staff in the ministry. It was observed that there was a problem between the Ministry and TEVETA, and some observers put the problem down to personality differences among some key result persons.

Tensions were, like air, existing somewhere but not quite observable to the casual onlooker. The problem seemed to have bothered the partners to the extent that one consultant in Organizational Development had to be called in by the World Bank to help in mitigating the situation through some team-building activities, which were not successful.

From this, one lesson was clear: if people are to work in teams, it is necessary to have team-building exercises beforehand. Where team-building exhortations and exercises become unproductive, other options will have to be explored.

**Issue of incentives and motivational factors can make or break a project**

At the start of the TDP, the ministry staff presented a request to donors for incentives to be paid to those coordinating components of the programme. Staff saw the task of coordinating components not as an integral part of their job descriptions but as an additional responsibility.

Partners seemed to understand, but were apprehensive of an incentive system that did not appear to be enshrined in the public service system. The result was that no incentive system was put in place for component coordinators. However, the program coordinator and his full time team at the Program Coordinating Office (PCO) were put on terms and conditions of service that were more favorable than of those of the public service.

The effect of this was apathy, to the detriment of the programme. It took a very long time for management to deal with this apathy.

Out of the experience, the lesson learned was that staff motivation is not a mere management textbook gimmick. People will always ask what is in it for them when tasked with responsibilities perceived to be additional to their job description. Ignoring this question can adversely affect a project.

**Publicity can make or break a project**

In the final year of the TDP, some partners more or less stumbled onto the website of the ministry. The reaction was: “You have done some good things which you have not told us about. The Statistical Digest and the website on which it is posted are very good initiatives.” Now this was an issue of publicity.

A project can be doing a lot of good things, but if they are not packaged well and publicized, project partners think nothing good is happening. Publicity is something that has to be done well in order to be effective. For this reason, the ministry had wanted to engage publicity experts in the early stages of the programme, using programme funds, but the zeal for the activity was not commonly shared with partners. As a result, funds for the activity were not available.

In the forth year of the programme, the ministry embarked on a publicity campaign in form of a Newsletter and television shows. From the impact of this strategy, a lesson was learned, namely: Publicity of the good side of a project is a must, otherwise people think of the entire project only in terms of its worst side. The many success stories that needed to have been told included the following:

1. The pedagogical training given to instructors from nearly every private and public training institution;  
2. The tracer studies that the Ministry instituted to gauge the demand responsiveness of training programs;  
3. The Government increased allocation of funds to TEVET from 0.4% to 0.8% of the discretionary budget;  
4. The induction of management boards to enhance their capacity to manage staff and programs, since the Ministry had removed staff from public pay roll and transferred the responsibility of employing staff to boards (the first induction was done with the help of an expert from Association of Canadian Community Colleges);  
5. Developing policies for Gender, HIV/AIDS, Disabilities and Asset Management;
6. Reviewing of TEVET curricula with the participation of industry to ensure relevance of programs;
7. Training of TEVET examiners to ensure proficiency in exam setting, marking, moderation and verification;
8. Renovations and recapitalization of training institutions once the Ministry of Works and Supply and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Vocational Training had worked on modalities for selecting and supervising building contractors;
9. Establishing Local Area Networks and internet in at least nine training institutions and training of staff in the management of ICT;
10. Establishment of a tradition for holding National Stakeholders Forum at which the Minister gave account of the ministry’s performance and received feedback from employers, labor unions, professional associations, public and private training providers, students, NGOs, government departments involved in TEVET, donors, etc.;
11. Introducing the custom of preparing National Skills Development Plans as a basis for financing skills matching the development needs of the country;

Year zero of a project can make or break the project

When all the above lessons are considered, one sees the need for project managers, implementers and beneficiaries to be made ready before the start of the project. People need an orientation programme for them to clearly see the impact of the project on their way of doing things.

In the case of the TDP, despite there having been utilization of the Project Preparation Facility (PPF), there was much that was not done before the programme effective date. There was no project management course for key persons involved in the TDP. One consequence of this was the serious omission of guidelines on monitoring and evaluation and insufficient establishment of baselines for the success indicators of the programme.

The lesson was that every project needs Year Zero, a period during which systems are built, people are oriented to their responsibilities and a proper environmental impact assessment (in the broad sense of the term) is done.

Conclusion

This article has given an emic account of some experiences from managing a large program funded by several funding agencies. It is hoped that other people that have had the opportunity to serve on project teams will also share their experiences in order to create a body of experience-based knowledge that will contribute to the improvement of future projects and maximization of the returns from the colossal sums of money financing development projects. As McAvoy (2006) observed, “For future projects to improve, it is necessary to learn lessons from previous projects” (p.65), and the lessons from projects will not be complete without stories from project participants.

REFERENCES