



# Success conditions for international development capacity building projects

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## Abstract

Current research on success factors fails to adequately explain why development projects will achieve success in one setting yet not in others, thus making improvements to project management practice difficult. By examining the underlying conditions enabling project success, we provide additional context and practical meaning for success factors. Through a case-study and a qualitative analysis of twenty interviews with project practitioners, we look into four capacity building projects in Ghana, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam and draw out structural, institutional, and managerial success conditions, whether they are initial or emergent. We further propose a hypothesis that high levels of multi-stakeholder commitment, collaboration, alignment, and adaptation are necessary for projects to succeed. Thus, we put the ability of projects to deliver development into context and call on practitioners to harness their ability to trigger development through a better understanding of enabling success conditions or the right circumstances under which projects thrive.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2006, PlayPump International, a development NGO, tested a delivery system to provide fresh water to sub-Saharan African villages where there are plenty of children but limited clean water sources. They conceived of a merry-go-around hooked up to a water pump that was to harness the energy of playful children. The goal of the PlayPump project was to install 4000 pumps in Africa by 2010 and to provide clean drinking water to some ten million people. The \$16-million-dollar project turned out to be a nightmare. So much so that the charity went bankrupt. Yet, as Hobbes (2014) noted, “...in some villages, under *the right circumstances*, they [the pumps] were fabulously helpful” (emphasis, added).

Assuredly, a good number of “common sense” international development (ID) projects – projects that are tasked with achieving the overarching goal of economic growth or poverty reduction through not-for-profit, humanitarian, and/or socio-economic objectives – fail to deliver much needed impact for beneficiaries (Agheneza, 2009; Banerjee and Duflo, 2011; Hobbes, 2014; Ika, 2012, 2015; Rondinelli, 1976). All too often projects succeed in one location and then fail, either partially or completely, somewhere else, emphasising the power of context in ID project success (e.g. Glewwe et al., 2009; Munk, 2013). Echoing the famous word of Engwall (2003), we suggest that context matters in ID projects and that: “No project is an island” (p. 789). “There are villages where deworming will be the most meaningful education project possible. There are others where free textbooks will. In other places, it will be new school buildings, more teachers, lower fees, better transport, tutors, uniforms. There’s probably a village out there where a Playpump would beat all these approaches combined. The

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point is, we don't know what works, where or why" (Hobbes, 2014). This observation begs the following questions: why do similar ID projects work in some places and fail in others? Why do some aspects of the projects work, whereas other aspects do not in similar settings? What could the right circumstances be?

While many reasons may explain the poor showing of ID projects, here we argue that they fail because project leaders struggle to understand not only the setting or context in which success occurs but project success conditions in particular (Gow and Morss, 1988; Ika, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014; Ramalingam, 2015). These success conditions or necessary states of being are circumstances or pre-requisites that must exist for project success to occur (Turner, 2004). They include what happens "in advance of the project" and "in the wake of the project" (Hirschman, 1967, p. 146). Indeed, ID projects interact with their settings; the whole of the projects are greater than the sum of their parts; thus, solutions cannot be imposed, rather they emerge from circumstances. Success is derived not from carbon copy replication but from the testing, scaling and failing of initiatives in a variety of socio-politico-geographic contexts (e.g., Hobbes, 2014; Ramalingam, 2015; Snowden and Boone, 2007). As Hirschman (1967) suggests, "not only are projects voyages of discovery, they tend to be voyages of the true Columbus type – setting trail for one destination (perhaps an unattainable one) but arriving in the event at quite a different one (perhaps much more important than the imagined one)" (Singer, 1969, p. 23). The above remarks are particularly true for capacity building<sup>1</sup> projects that focus specifically on ownership and change on the part of project beneficiaries and, as such, require a good understanding of context, multi-stakeholder engagement and dialogue, and, in particular, building more effective and dynamic relationships between different stakeholders behaving in often unpredictable ways (Baser and Morgan, 2008; Datta et al., 2012). Thus, this paper focuses on (local government) capacity building project success conditions and now, like Hirschman (1967), we ask: what conditions enable project success?

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, project supervisors and managers need more information about the journey, not simply the destination. It is not enough to draw out key success factors such as consultations, supervision, monitoring, communication, etc. without providing more about the context in which the factors succeeded (see for example, Diallo and Thuillier, 2005; Ika et al., 2012; Ika, 2015; Khang and Moe, 2008; Yalagama et al., 2016; Yasmin and Sim, 2016). Without this contextual knowledge, these key success factors are difficult to translate into practice. Different factors can lead to different outcomes in different contexts; and when the project does succeed in improving the context, it changes it in ways that couldn't have been expected. Consequently, project

supervisors and managers should depart from the seemingly taken-for-granted idea that projects fail because they aren't managed "by the book". Following project management standards and guidelines will *not* automatically lead to successful projects or result in positive improvements to the lives of their beneficiaries (Hirschman, 1967; Hobbes, 2014; Ramalingam, 2015; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007).

Second, in the multi-billion dollar ID sector where academic research on project management is surprisingly limited and where little has been done to understand project success, its root causes, its key factors, or its success conditions (Ika et al., 2012; Ika, 2015), this research will add to the literature. "Much remains to be done in understanding the conditions for failure and success of projects" (Hirschman, 1967, p. 188). Yet, these words of wisdom remain unheeded. This needs to change. Success conditions, especially at the moment of project initiation, we believe, could help us understand why some projects (or aspects of thereof) thrive in some settings and others do not. Thus, we hope, project supervisors and managers can more accurately target areas of improvement for future project management practice and put the ability of projects to deliver development into context.

## 2. What are the similarities and differences between international development projects and conventional projects? Why are capacity building projects even more specific?

### 2.1. International development projects share some characteristics and mismanagement concerns with other projects

International development (ID) projects cover almost every project setting: infrastructure, utilities, agriculture, transportation, water, electricity, energy, sewage, mines, health, nutrition, population and urban development, education, environment, social development, reform and governance, etc. Thus, they undisputedly share some characteristics with other projects: they deliver goods and services; they are often limited, temporary, unique, and multidisciplinary undertakings; they go through a life cycle; they face time, cost, and quality constraints; and they use project management standards, tools and techniques for their delivery (Golini et al., 2015; Ika, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014).

They also share a number of managerial challenges with other projects. They all too frequently fail in part because of mismanagement: imperfect project initiation, poor understanding of the project context, poor stakeholder management, "dirty" politics, delays during project execution, cost overruns, poor risk analysis, inadequate monitoring and evaluation failure, etc. (Agheneza, 2009; Gow and Morss, 1988; Ika, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014; Julian, 2016; Rondinelli, 1976).

### 2.2. International development projects are de facto public sector and international projects

ID projects are funded by agencies and donors from one or more "rich" countries and are implemented in another country rather "poor", which poses a number of political and cultural challenges (Ika and Hodgson, 2014). Their goals, objectives,

<sup>1</sup> A multidimensional concept, capacity is neither a specific ability/competency nor it is a secret ingredient as existing capacity may change, evolve, stagnate, deepen, erode, or stabilize. A multifaceted phenomenon, capacity building is not about delivering activities and outputs but fostering ownership or change through a deliberate and inherently political process focused on developing effective and dynamic relationships between different stakeholders and the system as a whole (Datta et al., 2012, pp., 2, 3, and 11).

and outcomes are often intangible and even conflicting; their scope or ambitions levels are often changing, and there are many layers of stakeholders<sup>2</sup> with conflicting, if not contradictory, expectations (Diallo and Thuillier, 2005; Ika, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014; Julian, 2016). ID projects are often subject to “optimism bias”, the common belief that one is at less risk than anyone else for experiencing a negative consequence in one’s project. They are the victims of “planning fallacy writ large”, the idea that the planned times, costs and benefits of a project are unrealistically close to best-case scenarios. ID projects are rife with strategic misrepresentation or knowingly underestimating initial budgets while overestimating benefits (Hirschman, 1967; Flyvbjerg and Sunstein, *in press*). They are also frequently subject to: media scrutiny, intolerance of failure, and rigid bureaucratic procedures and cumbersome policies. ID projects often make do with existing staff; the time between their conception and their delivery is relatively long; and they are often not-for-profit, social, technical, and political undertakings. In addition, ID projects are moulded and tweaked to answer both beneficiary and donor country programmes, strategies and policies (Ika, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014; Khang and Moe, 2008).

### *2.3. International development projects exhibit unique characteristics, goals and ways of organizing*

Poverty reduction is the ultimate goal of ID projects. Thus, ID projects are not driven by market pressures and their ‘end product’ outcomes are often intangible and frequently difficult to measure. This impact in terms of poverty reduction sets ID projects apart from other projects. In comparison to the private sector, where the client–contractor relationship is closely linked, the ID sector has additional layers of stakeholders and project beneficiaries that complicate accountability. For example in a private sector project, the client will pay a contractor to deliver a service or product. The funding client, as the main beneficiary of the project, will hold the contractor accountable for delivering the project. In ID projects however, this pay-for-service accountability is replaced by a complex web of mixed motivations, mismatched needs, knowledge gaps, and rigid management processes. Funders, contractors, and aid recipients are all accountable to different stakeholders at the same time. In ID projects, there are the funding agencies, who pay for (through loans or grants) but do not receive project deliverables, there are the implementing agencies who are involved in project delivery, and the target beneficiaries, who expect some benefit from them (Hirschman, 1967; Ika, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014; Khang and Moe, 2008).

### *2.4. International development projects occur in unique contexts and institutional settings*

ID projects exist in contexts that are plagued with a multitude of political, legal, cultural, technical, organizational, social, economic, and environmental challenges. These include institutional issues such as corruption, capacity building setbacks, recurrent costs of projects, lack of political support, and lack of implementation capacity. In addition, an overemphasis on visible and rapid results (over long term sustainable results) on the part of donors and political stakeholders contributes to the problems ID projects face in achieving meaningful outcomes (Gow and Morss, 1988; Ika, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014).

In summary, we contend that while ID projects are similar to and yet different from conventional projects, their characteristics are not necessarily unique (Ika, 2012). They do however represent “an extreme case of characteristics common to conventional projects, whether they are private or public sector, national or international projects...Their socio-political complexity, we argue, is often high and, thus, they would fit at the far right end of the spectrum on a continuum from private sector projects, through public sector projects, to international projects” (Ika and Hodgson, 2014, p. 1186).

### *2.5. What makes capacity building projects different from other international development projects?*

It is common in the sector to distinguish between blueprint or infrastructure ID projects and process or human capital-based ID projects such as policy advice, education, health, and capacity building in general. While humanitarian and infrastructure ID projects may focus on the pure delivery of goods and services, capacity building ID projects are different in that they focus on ownership and the ability of people, institutions and stakeholders to elicit developmental change (Datta et al., 2012). For example, while building a water reservoir may represent a humanitarian/infrastructure initiative, improving its management constitutes the capacity building challenge.

Although different from one ID organization to another, capacity building projects vary depending on the mandate, stakeholder, and scale of activity. Yet they all aim at “...developing the emergent combination of individual competencies and collective capabilities that enables a human system to create value” (Baser and Morgan, 2008, p. 35). Such projects may include training local staff to improve the delivery of a service, improving waste or water management or may focus on internal organizational processes like improving financial management, access to information, more efficient data collection, or strengthening political reforms.

There is a range of capacity building projects and project management approaches. While most conventional capacity building projects rely on training and workshops, technical advice focused on specific systems/procedures, support to project management, and support to lobby and advocacy work, more advanced ones focus on more intensive methods of multi-stakeholder engagement and dialogue. These include knowledge brokering, networking, change and process facilitation, mediation,

<sup>2</sup> For example, there may be as many as eight different stakeholders in World Bank-funded projects: The project manager, the project supervisor at the World Bank, the recipient country national supervisor, a steering committee, subcontractors, suppliers of goods and services, beneficiaries, and the population at large (Diallo and Thuillier, 2005; Ika et al., 2012).

and leadership development. As such, these projects require, as mentioned in the introduction, a good understanding of context to build more effective and dynamic relationships between different stakeholders who often behave in rather unpredictable ways (Datta et al., 2012). But what makes capacity building ID projects successful?

### 3. International development capacity building project success and success conditions

#### 3.1. Capacity building project success

The complex web of stakeholders and the intangible (and often conflicting) socio-political objectives that characterise ID projects in general and capacity building projects in particular make consensus around definitions and forecasting of success challenging (see Turner and Zolin, 2012 for large projects in general). Although not all agencies embrace identical success criteria, work done by the OECD to harmonise aid delivery amongst agencies has led to more or less similar measures for success across the ID sector. Looking into World Bank-funded projects, Ika et al. (2012) identified the generally agreed upon success criteria found in ID and validated the following list of seven measures for their research: Efficiency (time), Efficiency (cost), Effectiveness (objectives), Relevance (country), Relevance (beneficiaries), Impact (the positive, negative, direct or indirect, planned or unintended benefits from the project), and Sustainability (the likelihood that benefits will continue after donor funding has been withdrawn).

Like for other projects, one may assess ID project success along two dimensions: the short-term “project management success”, the delivery of the project on time, within cost, and to specific objectives; and the long-term “deliverable success”, the long-range project benefits such as impact, sustainability, and relevance for both country and beneficiaries (see for example, Turner and Zolin, 2012 who distinguish between time–cost–quality performance and project impact for large projects in general; and Ika, 2015 for ID projects in particular). But, in a way similar to Shenhar and Dvir (2007) and many others, we believe that project management success and deliverable success should not be separated, and that they are the two sides of the same coin. For that matter, even though deliverable success is the overarching success dimension for capacity building ID projects because they focus on outcomes *not*

activities (Baser and Morgan, 2008; Datta et al., 2012), in this research success means both project management success and deliverable success and, thus, includes all the above success criteria or measures.

#### 3.2. Capacity building project success conditions

Acknowledging the contextual and perceptual ambiguity surrounding definitions of ID project success we turn our attention to research surrounding “success factors” (see Diallo and Thuillier, 2005; Ika et al., 2012; Ika, 2015; Khang and Moe, 2008; Yalegama et al., 2016; Yasmin and Sim, 2016). For example, if a project manager is trying to achieve “impact”, a key factor contributing to this criterion may come in the form of strong local ownership (Khang and Moe, 2008). Similarly, if a development agency is trying to ensure project management success or the delivery of the project within time, cost, and objectives, a key factor is project supervision (Ika, 2015). A summary of key success factors for ID projects is listed in Table 1.

The above-mentioned success factors may initially appear more practical and easier to apply in project management practice. However, if a project manager attempts to design concrete activities into a project using these success factors as they are presented in the literature, the lists fall short. This is due to the fact that, as we saw in the introduction, we do not know *in which circumstances* these success factors actually improve project performance. Table 1 also illustrates the types of questions a manager needs to answer before s/he can make use of identified success factors. A more user friendly list of *success conditions* needs to be devised to bring success factor knowledge into the practical realm of project management.

Admittedly, it is not rare to come across studies that blur success factors and success conditions. For example, Ika et al. (2012) and Ika (2015) define critical success factors as *conditions*, events, and circumstances contributing to project results. But in this paper, we submit that success conditions are the necessary states of being, circumstances or pre-requisites that must exist for project success to occur (Turner, 2004), thus, introducing at least a nuance between success factors and success conditions. To provide an example, Wateridge (1995) discovered that *consensus* on success criteria needed to be agreed upon before the start of a project, otherwise initially small divergent views amongst stakeholders on the importance

Table 1  
Key success factors summary.

Authors	ID project success factors	Application
Diallo and Thuillier (2005)	Trust and communication	How does a project build trust? With whom?
Ika et al. (2012), Ika (2015), Yasmin and Sim (2016)	Supervision; monitoring, design, coordination, training, and institutional environment	What does a successful institutional environment look like? How does training lead to project success?
Khang and Moe (2008)	Understanding of project environment, competencies of project staff, effective stakeholder consultations, compatibility of rules and procedures, adequate resources, commitment to goals, sustained government policy, adequate local capacity, and strong local ownership	Who should be consulted? When? Which capacities are considered adequate? Under what circumstances does strong commitment and ownership occur?
Yalegama et al. (2016)	Enabling community environment; measuring project management outcomes; and community project management engagement	How does a project enable a supportive environment and what does it look like? Who should be engaged and how?



of different criteria would amplify substantially as the project progressed and lead to significantly different opinions on project results. In fact, so important is the state of *consensus* that without it, Wateridge discovered, the project would not achieve a successful outcome. Wateridge identified a necessary ‘condition’ that must exist for a project to be successful.

Turner (2004) further stressed that conditions, like *consensus*, should be assessed periodically in order to improve the chances for project success because circumstances are bound to change.

Success conditions are not only essential to the final outcome of the project, but they need to be maintained by the project in order to continue. Like a snapshot in time, identifying the success conditions provides project managers with a broader perspective on how they might influence project outcomes.

Yet, very little academic research has explored the effects of different external and internal conditions on a project’s final success, or provided suggestions on what conditions enable ID project success. The only notable exception is the work of Hirschman (1967), who, celebrating the power of context and the sheer importance of social and political aspects in a project, offered insights into ID project success conditions. He differentiated between the success conditions that would occur “in advance of the project” and those that would emerge “in the wake of the project” (p. 146). Thus, there are initial success conditions, those that are already present at the project inception and emergent success conditions, those that arise once the project implementation has started. This theoretical framework speaks to a project’s ability to recognise and hone in on initial (early) success conditions and emergent (late) success conditions, its ability to collect relevant information and perhaps more importantly, the ability of the project to act on the project setting in a timely manner. But since Hirschman’s unheeded call, almost 50 years ago, to investigate success conditions, we still do not know what conditions enable ID project success. Hence, in this research, borrowing from Hirschman (1967) and, thus, sticking to his choice of words, success *conditions*, not factors, we ask: what are the critical conditions that enable project success?

#### 4. Conceptual framework: measuring capacity building project success conditions

To develop areas of investigation for potential project success conditions, this research drew from Ika’s (2012) work on ID project management failure. After Gow and Morss (1988) and Collier (2007), Ika (2012) proposed three main categories of problems that serve to explain to a large degree the poor success rate of ID projects. Ika’s three categories are as follows, a) structural, b) institutional and c) managerial. These three areas, altogether, reflect the context surrounding the projects, including the social, political, technical, institutional, organizational and managerial setting of the project (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). Ika’s assessment of make-or-break categories of success served as a starting point for identifying potential conditions both internal and external to the project. Thus project success conditions would include: structural

conditions (C1), institutional conditions (C2) and finally project management conditions (C3).

- Structural conditions (C1): this incorporates legal and regulatory frameworks, financial resources, enabling institutions, geography, community stakeholders and socio-cultural aspects. More specifically, building on decentralisation research by Boex et al. (2006) and UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments, 2013), here, we measure *Legal/Regulatory frameworks* (C1.1), *Financial resources* (C1.2), and *Contextual environment* (C1.3).
- Institutional conditions: this includes organizational capacity of both the project beneficiary organization and the implementing agency.
  - Institutional conditions regarding the beneficiary organization (the local government) (C2): Using the work of UCLG (2013) on successful decentralisation factors, and Baser and Morgan’s (2008) research on successful capacity development, we consider the following institutional conditions: *C2.1 Accountability/Public participation*; *C2.2 Local Government capacity (including C2.2.1 Capability to commit, C2.2.2 New technical expertise, C2.2.3 Capability to attract resources, C2.2.4 Capability to manage diversity, and C2.2.5 Capability to adapt knowledge and skills)*.
  - Institutional conditions regarding the implementing agency (C3): using Söderlund’s (2004) and Ika’s (2012) research on the important effect of agency contributions to the success of a project and Baser and Morgan’s (2008) five elements of capacity, we pick up these success conditions: *C3.1 Capability to commit, C3.2 New technical expertise, C3.3 Capability to attract resources, C3.4 Capability to manage diversity, and C3.5 Capability to adapt and self-renew*.
- Managerial conditions (C4): this category refers to project leadership, design, monitoring, and stakeholder coordination. The following project management conditions were developed using Khang and Moe’s (2008) and Ika et al.’s (2012) work on critical success factors: *C4.1 Project leadership, C4.2 Project monitoring, C4.3 Project design, and C4.4 Stakeholder coordination*.

Fig. 1 is a summary of the research framework, demonstrating the combined influences of structural conditions, institutional conditions and project management conditions enabling project success.

#### 5. Methodological approach

In this research, we sought to explore the following research question: what are the conditions that enable (capacity building) project success (Hirschman, 1967)?

The limited research literature on ID project success or failure conditions led us to apply an exploratory theory-building design (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). A two-step research approach was developed. Firstly, a conceptual framework (Fig. 1) was developed from the literature review and was labelled the



Fig. 1. Measurement framework for international development project success conditions.

“framework success conditions”. Secondly, an inductive approach was applied to identify new success conditions that came up from the research process. These conditions were labelled the “meta-conditions” as they appeared to incorporate the original framework conditions but also “success factors” examined in our literature review early on in the research.

To address the qualitative nature of the research question a multiple case study design was applied. Case projects were selected, then semi-structured interviews were conducted with the project practitioners involved in their implementation. Respondents reflected a diversity of perspectives (i.e. project managers, field coordinators, technical experts, project beneficiaries) and represented a range of different hierarchical levels, functional areas, and geographical locations. To triangulate the data, written project documentation (proposals, reports, and implementation plans) was used to further improve the validity of the information. Indeed, while reports, case studies, and evaluations could have provided valuable insights on their own, they did not always contain the context-specific information needed to identify underlying success conditions. Thus, written documentation was used to capture more general project information like the background, objectives of the broader umbrella programme, primary participants, scope, main results, and unexpected results of the case projects. Combined, the two sources provided a stronger narrative and clearer snapshot of events as they occurred at the time. Finally, both the framework conditions and the meta-conditions were presented to project practitioners in a workshop to test the validity and applicability of the success conditions in every day project management practice.

### 5.1. Case selection

To draw out potential success conditions, the authors chose a replication logic (Yin, 2013). Most successful cases were

selected for their ability to demonstrate (overall) success while a *less* successful case was singled out for its contrasting outcomes. One Ottawa (Canada)-based implementing agency, focused on local government capacity building, was selected to facilitate the identification of the cases. The authors began by seeking headquarters (HQ) Ottawa-based project management staff perception of project success.

Ideally, it would have been best to select successful cases versus failed ones, to avoid “sampling on the dependant variable”, in this case, project success. However, within the implementing agency selected for this study, finding complete sets of data for failed projects proved challenging. It was explained to researchers that in practice, if a project level initiative was struggling to move forward, final outcomes could be redefined (in cooperation with the donor agency) and resources could be redirected to aspects of the programme that are progressing well; as long as the broad higher programme level objectives remain intact. Although “lessons learned” for individual projects were frequently described in case studies and the narratives of project reports, clear evidence for fully failed projects remained elusive. This left researchers with identification of most successful and less successful cases only. The experience of the second author who worked as a programme manager at the same implementing agency attests to this reality.

Hence, 35 HQ staff were asked to provide the researchers with *perceived* examples of successful local government capacity building projects. Initially they came up with six projects. Two of the originally selected projects were dropped because these projects did not have complete sets of existing documentation (reports, case studies, proposals, evaluations, mission plans, etc.) or interview candidates available for the research. Then, in order to further reduce the likelihood of skewed impressions in the overall research results and, thus, increase its overall validity, we later asked a variety of respondents from different hierarchical levels, functional areas and geographical locations to rate overall project success (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

Ultimately, four (4) case projects, including (3) most successful and (1) less successful fit the criteria for selection. Criteria included: programme component (project was part of a programme), project success (high perception of the project being most or less successful by HQ staff), type of project (capacity building), timeframe (completed prior to 2012), beneficiary organizations (local governments), and budget (under \$150,000). In so doing, we ensured that the cases were each part of a programme and typical peer-to-peer local government capacity development for the implementing agency. The four case projects/case-studies are summarised in Table 2 along with their background, their umbrella programme, objectives, and both main and unexpected results. Drawn from the collected project documentation, specifically from project proposals, reports and implementation plans, this analysis helped in the interpretation of the research findings. A summary of interview respondent demographics and their roles on the projects can be found in Table 3.

We note that the most successful projects were the ones in Vietnam (Administrative reforms), Indonesia (Library services), and Ghana (Hand washing). These projects scored higher on the

Table 2  
Summary of case projects.

Case projects	Location and beneficiary	Objectives/results	HQ staff perception of development success	Duration	Budget	Primary participants
Case #1: support to administrative reforms in land management and taxation Background: as part of an ongoing municipal partnership programme linking Canadian municipalities with communities in developing countries, the project was an adaptation of an earlier pilot project implemented in Vietnam in collaboration with the City of Saguenay, Quebec.	The City of Nam Dinh, Vietnam	Objectives: To increase the urban planning and development capacity of the city Main results: All Nam Dinh territory mapped and entered into the registry; Accelerated property-title-issuing process Unexpected results: The creation of one of the first land use public information centres in Vietnam and achievement of national impact through direct contributions to national land use legislation.	Most successful	December 2004 to March 2008	\$131,216	2 Canadian project staff, 2 staff from the Association of Cities of Vietnam, 3 municipal experts, 5 staff from the City of Nam Dinh
Case #2: improvement of solid waste management services Background: the project was part of the larger Canada/Sri Lanka Municipal Cooperation Programme (MCP) implemented as part of a reconstruction initiative in response to the 2004 tsunami that hit coastal communities in Sri Lanka	The Municipal Council of Galle, Sri Lanka	To improve sanitation and reduce waste disposal by strengthening garbage collection methods in pilot wards Main results: reduced solid waste by 50% in two wards; reduced number and volume of waste in illegal dump sites Unexpected results: contribution to a reduction of fatalities from mosquito-borne dengue fever in Galle	Less successful	December 2005 to March 2008	\$65,730	2 Canadian project staff, 2 Sri Lankan field staff, 2 municipal experts, 6 staff from the Municipality of Galle
Case #3: improvement of library services Background: the project was part of larger Canada/Aceh Local Government Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Programme (CALGAP) initiative aimed at supporting the reconstruction of Aceh province following the 2004 tsunami that hit the island of Sumatra, Indonesia.	The District of Pidie, Indonesia	To meet the needs of the public through improved core library services and enhanced learning opportunities Main results: a 270% increase in visitors; improved interaction with community; better services to community needs Unexpected results: success in the improved library led to acquisition of a second bookmobile; change in public working-hour by-laws; selected as the best library in the province in 2008	Most successful	December 2006 to June 2008	\$122,365	2 Canadian project staff, 2 Sri Lankan field staff, 2 municipal experts, several staff from the District of Pidie
Case #4: hand washing in elementary schools Background: as part of an ongoing municipal partnership programme linking Canadian municipalities with communities in developing countries, the project was the second phase of an already existing collaboration between the City of Ottawa and partners in the KEEA district.	The District of Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abrem (K-E-E-A), Ghana	To promote good health amongst school children through the adoption of appropriate hand washing practices for the prevention and control of spread of infection Main results: joint development of a training manual and tools for the programme; Train-the-trainer programme implemented with 25 public health workers; health workers trained teachers from selected pilot schools Unexpected results: hand washing behaviours went beyond the school children as parents began to adopt better hand-washing practices as well; the District health department implemented new regulations to improve hand-washing facilities and infrastructure in schools and in community health centres	Most successful	March 2007 to December 2009	\$109,564	2 Canadian project staff, 2 municipal experts, several staff from the District of K.E.E.A.





Canadian implementation managers (supervisory role), nine Canadian technical experts (specialized technical assistance), one implementation coordinator (country based implementation assistance), and two beneficiaries/coordinators (project champions working for the local government but also in a coordinating role).

This research received feedback from a total of 20 participants (8 men and 12 women). Interviews were then transcribed and coded using qualitative computer software (NVIVO). Once transcribed, the authors began with an initial scan of the data, labelling statements and observing potential emerging trends. Then, using the “framework conditions” as a guide, concepts were grouped together into condition categories to identify the common cross-case conditions for success. The authors reached consensus on the coding through careful revision of categories and determination of how a text passage could be coded to a category, thus ensuring trustworthiness or reliability of the coding. Interview questions were designed essentially to draw out the structural, institutional and project management conditions, that respondents considered important to the success of their projects (see [Appendix 1](#) for the interview guide).

Interview statements were coded according to the role of the respondents and the project that they worked on. For instance, if a respondent was a manager on the Vietnam project they were coded as VM1. If VM1 mentioned that the commitment of the beneficiaries was critical to the success of the project, VM1’s statement was coded to C2.2.1 Capacity of Beneficiary Institution to Commit. The total number of respondents who mentioned each framework condition was then added together, giving the researcher a cumulative percentage of positively referenced framework success conditions. In the case of C2.2.1 Capacity of Beneficiary Institution to Commit, 19 out of 20 respondents (95%) mentioned this condition contributed to the success of their programme. Framework conditions receiving more than a 60% positive response rate from interviewees were deemed important contributors to success. In our view, although these percentages of individual respondents mentioning the same success condition are not meant to support any statistical test of hypotheses, they are offered as a better indicator of overall importance of this particular success condition than the absolute number of times it is expressed and coded as a relevant success condition theme.

Additionally the authors prepared four case-studies for the projects. For lack of space, a shortened version of the case studies is provided (see [Table 2](#)). Multiple case studies enabled a broader area of theory-building as they provided us with the option to conduct cross-case comparisons, derive patterns, and clarify findings ([Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007](#)). A cross-case analysis was thus applied to identify similarities, patterns and themes relating to success conditions for each case studied. The data was also examined for rival explanations, comparing the conditions for other influences or alternative explanations ([Yin, 2013](#)). A within case analysis was also conducted to identify variances in responses between interview respondents. All the above further increased the overall validity of the findings.

To delve further into the reasons behind the framework responses (described by one of the researchers as the “what”

conditions), data was then re-coded using an inductive “meta-condition” analysis by distinguishing between answers that spoke to a reason (why), a process (how), points in time (when), and answers that identified the engagement of different stakeholders (who). For instance, if an interviewee mentioned the fact that the mayor of a municipality contributed to the success of the project, this was coded as a sub-category under “stakeholders”. As the coding progressed, categories relating to the “who, when, how, and why” were surprisingly repetitive for each interview. Although unique in their detail, the broader categories were remarkably consistent and thus clustered into four new conditions for success. For example, the data revealed that a variety of stakeholder groups contributed to the success of all the projects (donors, elected officials, community groups, other municipalities, etc.). Although the individual groups were different between the projects, the unplanned and emergent involvement of stakeholder groups engaging at different points in time and contributing to the success of the project was mentioned by all 20 respondents. This resulted in the meta-condition labelled “multi-stakeholder commitment”. Responses from the framework conditions and the meta-conditions were then cross-tabulated for any association. This pattern-matching approach, i.e. drawing from both case evidence and emerging logic, strengthened the rigour and depth of the emerging hypothesis, increasing the ability of authors to apply and test it at a future date ([Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007](#)).

## 6. Framework success conditions: findings and discussion

With almost all the framework success conditions perceived as important by the interviewees, the research confirmed the influence of all three categories of success conditions (context, institution, and project management) for ID projects. Most notably, the research also elicited emergent success conditions, those that were not already present before the start of the projects, but did emerge during their implementation, as observed by [Hirschman \(1967\)](#). They are discussed below. Furthermore, although difficult to summarise in the format presented in [Table 5](#) above, these findings did prompt interesting narrative data on how the framework conditions contributed to the success of all four projects.

### 6.1. Context: shifting boundaries and enabling institutions

Respondents stated that traditional barriers to new initiatives (like cumbersome management processes or administrations resisting change) were reduced due to important stressors occurring in the broader environment. For instance, in the case of the Indonesia and Sri Lanka projects, the chaos of the tsunami disaster created an opportunity for local governments to act more independently than usual and provided space for local government action. In Vietnam, the country was in the midst of a cultural reform process that made issues surrounding land rights and land management a priority for the government and its citizens. The Ghana hand-washing project began around the same time the World Health Organization (WHO) initiated

Table 5  
Findings for framework conditions.

Conditions	Indicators	Total (# respondents indicating condition enabled project success)	Overall perceived importance of identified success condition (>60% = Perceived as important <sup>a</sup> )
<b>Structural conditions</b>			
C1.1 Legal/Regulatory frameworks	Legal mandate of local governments (LG)  Degree of independence from central government  Inclusive decentralisation process	10 (50%)	Not perceived as important
C1.2 Financial resources	Sources of revenue for LG to fulfill mandate  Predictability of revenue	5 (25%)	Not perceived as important
C1.3 Contextual environment	Enabling Institutions  Community Stakeholders  Geography and Size  Other	20 (100%)	Perceived as important
<b>Institutional conditions (beneficiary agency)</b>			
C2.1 Accountability and public participation	Improvements to policies/services/practices through accountability mechanisms	18 (90%)	Perceived as important
C2.2 Beneficiary institution capacity	C2.2.1 Capability to commit (leadership, clear and aligned mandate, local champions)	19 (95%)	Perceived as important
	C2.2.2 Capability to acquire new skill (measured improvement in performing a service or task)	17 (85%)	Perceived as important
	C2.2.3 Capability to attract resources and support (engaging key stakeholders & institutions)	12 (60%)	Perceived as important

<sup>a</sup> This criterion is not meant to support any statistical test of hypotheses but is offered as an indicator of the overall perceived importance of a particular success condition.

a global hand hygiene campaign, increasing the visibility and importance of issues surrounding community health. Ultimately, changes in the contextual conditions brought additional relevance to the projects and helped contribute to their success.

*“They were in a post-disaster context so everything got thrown up in the air. Even if there were clear regulations between the ministries for local governments and the ministries for environment before the tsunami, after the*

*tsunami everything was a free-for-all. There were urgent needs and whoever was the quickest to attend was the one that was in charge.”*

*(Project Manager, Sri Lanka)*

Organizations present in the enabling environment were seen as direct contributors to success as all projects benefitted from the help provided by other NGOs, donors, associations, other departments, other levels of government, or local

academic institutions. Although the mandate and role of these organizations varied across projects, respondents consistently pointed to the involvement of additional organizations that volunteered resources and at times assisted in the delivery of certain project components (e.g., Yalagama et al., 2016).

*“First the (local government) association saw the value of it, and then the ministry saw the value of it, and then the Swiss (development agency) saw it as a valuable component for their project. I think the combination of interest from different parties made the project a success. It was serving the needs of different actors.”*

(Project Manager, Vietnam)

Interestingly, the involvement of these key enabling organizations was not always planned. The involvement and roles of the relevant organizations in the project emerged dynamically throughout the course of implementation, reflecting what we called, earlier, emergent success conditions in this research.

#### 6.2. Beneficiary organization: leadership, commitment and accountability

The abilities of the beneficiary champions to lead, manage, delegate and motivate staff effectively figured strongly in the data. To this point, when respondents described the project leader's ability to adapt to new approaches, create effective teams, and broker resources across boundaries, they were often referring to the lead beneficiary of the project, not the implementing agency project managers.

*“At first there was reluctance to help. The mayor and key city people might have felt a little threatened, but the city's director of health talked to them one on one and convinced them that this had nothing to do with their abilities or accomplishments. They were told that rather, this had to do with a lack of medical support and that this initiative would be a joint project in which the mayor and staff would benefit. Once they were convinced, the project took off.”*

(Technical Expert, Ghana)

The capacity of the beneficiary organization to commit to the project also figured strongly in the data. The engagement and motivation of beneficiaries to contribute time to the project was an important contribution to success.

*“The staff owned it. Some projects were snubbed but this one became incorporated into their portfolio because of the level of engagement of staff.”*

(Project Coordinator, Sri Lanka)

The willingness to be accountable to the public was seen by most respondents as an essential part of project success for the beneficiary organization (see Ika and Hodgson, 2014). The level of enthusiasm amongst a wide variety of community stakeholders to not only participate in customer feedback surveys but to see their suggestions incorporated into improved service delivery

was a strong success condition for the respondents interviewed (e.g., Yalagama et al., 2016). Building trust between the community and local government took time however. It was a condition that evolved gradually as government employees were able to demonstrate that they were listening and responding to community feedback. In Indonesia, a change of library hours and library materials occurred following regular customer service surveys. In Ghana, feedback from the public health awareness campaigns led to a change in local bylaws, making mandatory the availability of water for each new school built in the District. In Sri Lanka, the results of stakeholder inputs resulted in scheduling and route changes of garbage collection services. In Vietnam, public interest in the collection of new land title data led to the creation of a city service centre to provide transparent access to information that was not available before. Altogether these are other good examples of emergent success conditions.

*“The pressure was coming from the community and, seeing how well the project was going, more people used the facility. It was visibly improving.”*

(Technical Expert, Indonesia)

#### 6.3. Implementing organization: expertise, stakeholder coordination and conflict management

The strongest success condition for the capacity of the implementing agency revolved around the projects' ability to bring technical expertise and build the capacity of beneficiaries. The ability of the technical experts to adapt to the beneficiary environment, remain committed and supportive, work in collaboration and provide the appropriate tools and feedback for their partners, was mentioned as an important success condition by almost all respondents. Being able to mobilise the 'right' expertise to fit the needs of the beneficiaries, in particular a practitioner-to-practitioner model, was also seen by respondents as important to success.

*“They (experts from Canada) knew how to sit side by side and work with their partners. They would challenge them, they would disagree with them, and they would make suggestions and follow up.”*

(Project Manager, Vietnam)

The capacity of the project agency to attract support, mediate misunderstandings, and broker consensus amongst a multitude of stakeholders, enabling institutions, different levels of government, and other donors highlights areas where the implementing agency was highly effective in contributing to projects. Indeed, the projects provided the opportunity for multiple stakeholders to work together in ways they had never done before. Creating opportunities for community outreach, consultation, and public interaction were described by respondents as moments when the local government beneficiaries were able to take pride in playing an active and visible role for their community. The deliberate and consistent engagement of multiple key stakeholders, including political stakeholders,

working in partnerships towards a common goal was mentioned frequently by respondents as an important contribution to the success of the projects (e.g., Yalegama et al., 2016).

*“As project staff, we ensured that both departments were informed and we coordinated the people that had to come together to get things done. Working with the political leadership, which can be frustrating, was also something that the project staff were responsible for.”*

*(Project Coordinator, Sri Lanka)*

#### 6.4. Monitoring and motivation

The way respondents described how monitoring contributed to success is worth mentioning. Monitoring was mentioned for its ability to demonstrate the concrete next steps to take towards addressing the local government challenge (e.g., Ika et al., 2012; Yasmin and Sim, 2016). This led to an increase in motivation by the beneficiaries and increased the credibility of the beneficiaries in their community and with elected officials. Monitoring was often as simple as planned regular visits to revise step-by-step objectives, but it could also be more elaborate. The Ghana project created a monitoring committee to ensure proper adaptation of hand-washing training modules; the Indonesia project applied extensive customer feedback surveys; the Sri Lanka project allowed a local University to evaluate their efforts on behalf of community stakeholders; and in Vietnam, the project beneficiaries were in the habit of presenting results during their local government council meetings on a regular basis. The ability to see and demonstrate early successes was also seen as an important motivator for beneficiaries. This description of project monitoring by respondents, not only as a demonstration of progress towards final results, but as a tool to motivate beneficiaries, broker commitment, and maintain proper alignment with community stakeholder needs (e.g., Ika,

2012) was an interesting subtlety that emerged during the project implementation as an emergent success condition.

*“As the teachers monitored progress using the tools, the monitoring provided an incentive to perform well in order to achieve success.”*

*(Technical Expert, Ghana)*

### 7. The meta-conditions: findings and discussion

To complement the deductive exploratory process described above, an inductive cross-case analysis was also applied to identify any new patterns in the data. The authors focused on common conditions identified by all (100%) of the interview respondents as success conditions that came up from the data. As a guide to draw out the circumstances behind the framework (the literature-based) success conditions, categories relating to who, when, how and why were coded. The authors distinguished between answers that spoke to a reason (why), a process (how), points in time (when), and stakeholder engagement (who). For example, interview data mentioning the contribution of the mayor of a municipality to project success was re-coded as a sub-category under stakeholders. As a result, four new conditions emerged strongly. Table 6 below illustrates the meta-conditions and provides additional context on how projects could create and manage the conditions over time.

#### 7.1. Multi-stakeholder commitment

The Commitment condition captures responses that speak to the motivation, engagement, participation and ownership of the projects on the part of project stakeholders. This Commitment condition shows the importance of not only one committed project champion, but multiple committed project champions, all

Table 6  
Meta-conditions for success.

Meta-conditions (100% respondents indicated conditions enabled project success)	Process (how conditions are achieved)	Application
Multi-stakeholder commitment	Attainability of objectives (strengthened Commitment) Demonstrating project value (strengthened Commitment)	Attainability of objectives <i>Break down objectives, make them attainable; regular engagement</i> Demonstrating project value <i>Build narrative; provide tools; create sharing opportunities</i>
Collaboration	Ability of stakeholders (enabled effective Collaboration) Inclusiveness (enabled effective Collaboration)	Ability of stakeholders <i>Complementary teams; mutual accountability through joint ownership</i> Inclusiveness <i>Create spaces for interaction; mediate tension; facilitate partnerships</i>
Alignment	Planning and design (contributed to Alignment)  Mutual interest (contributed to Alignment)	Planning and design <i>Plan incrementally; involve implementing stakeholders in design and planning stages</i> Mutual interest <i>Find the win-win-win scenario for multiple key stakeholders; timing</i>
Adaptation	Monitoring (contributed to Adaptation)  Support (contributed to Adaptation)	Monitoring <i>Observe for opportunities and risks; act in a timely manner</i> Support <i>Motivate; advise; facilitate; provide guidance</i>



playing a unique role in the success of the project. In all four projects studied, the involvement of political champions, beneficiary champions, community champions, Canadian technical experts, other stakeholders (i.e. associations or academic institutions), and project management staff, created a depth of resources working towards common results. Somewhat like an orchestra playing a musical score, if some of the instruments happen to falter, other instruments can continue carrying the tune. In Sri Lanka, when the political champions faced re-election, the technical champions and project staff helped carry the project temporarily until new political champions were engaged. In Vietnam, when the beneficiary champions were not able to move forward for regulatory reasons, the local government association stepped in and engaged key political stakeholders who resolved the issue and cleared the path for the project to continue. This finding is supported in the literature. For example, Datta et al. (2012) emphasised multi-actor engagement and dialogue for capacity building projects and Yalegama et al. (2016) also highlighted the importance of engagement in the ID project management process.

Respondents described the application of regular engagement mechanisms to fuel the commitment of a variety of stakeholders. Activities like study tours, open houses, knowledge sharing workshops, and regular check-in meetings with mayors and/or community leaders, were seen as effective ways of reminding stakeholders of project progress and project value. The ability of beneficiaries to demonstrate the value of their projects to the community, city councils, universities, higher levels of government, and donors was mentioned by respondents as an indicator of ownership and increased capacity. The project and project managers contributed to this condition by helping stakeholders build a narrative that helped beneficiaries tell their story. The project provided the communication or marketing tools, the venues, and the network to enable partners to share their successes amongst peers and colleagues.

The select following quotes are expressions of the multi-stakeholder commitment condition:

*“A committed mayor is night and day to the success of the project. If a mayor isn't committed to the idea and doesn't take ownership of it then the chances of success are very low.”*

*(Project Manager, Sri Lanka)*

*“One thing that helped was that the province took an interest in the property titles aspect of the project. They understood that what we were developing would go faster than the central government's ability to bring a solution. The province really helped by giving the city approval to move forward using a different method of collecting land data.”*

*(Technical Expert, Vietnam)*

## 7.2. Collaboration (teamwork)

The Collaboration condition captures interview responses that mention the coordination, quality, and ability of team

members to work together to achieve the project objective. The Collaboration condition demonstrates the importance of early participatory design mechanisms to generate feelings of ownership, trust and partnership. Success was achieved by bringing together diverse high functioning teams of stakeholders dedicated to implementing project goals. Respondents also mentioned the importance of consensus and joint ownership on the part of all team members to build mutual accountability around expected outcomes. Illustrating this point, the following quotes are from two respondents:

*“The project should have a good team to implement the ideas. I have seen many ideas but to implement them requires a team to organize the work.”*

*(Project Coordinator, Vietnam)*

*“There was excellent collaboration between city staff and experts. Ideas and strategies were not imposed. There was a high sense of ownership.”*

*(Project Coordinator, Ghana)*

The strong collaborative spirit built trust and, in some cases, helped provide access to information, people and networks that other much larger donors could not obtain. This finding adds some context in support of Diallo and Thuillier's (2005) work on trust and communication being a critical project success factor. Notably, the core implementing teams in all four projects were described by respondents as stable. The experts and key implementing beneficiaries were consistent throughout the projects despite considerable turnover with political stakeholders and project management staff. This suggests the importance of getting the core team “right” very early in the implementation process. By taking advantage of the ability of stakeholders and by being inclusive and participative, the projects obtained and maintained the Collaboration condition.

Effective communication mechanisms also figured strongly as a means of obtaining and maintaining the condition although it should be noted that two of the projects were faced with significant linguistic hurdles and lacked quality translators. The quality of the expertise, mutual accountability, and consensus around the goal overcame linguistic hurdles. Finally, the projects and project managers contributed to the condition by creating safe spaces for feedback, helping mediate tensions, or simply creating new opportunities for collaboration amongst stakeholders that have never had a reason to collaborate before.

## 7.3. Alignment (compatibility, fit)

The Alignment condition captures interview responses that mention the compatibility and fit of the project theme within the environment. This includes not only the environment of the beneficiaries, but also the environment of the implementing agency, the enabling institutions, and higher levels of government. The Alignment condition demonstrates the importance of personal and organizational interests in the final outcome of the project. When project staff, experts, and beneficiaries are faced

with competing work priorities, this mutual interest, understanding or compatibility amongst a multitude of key stakeholders, can help provide momentum and contextual fit for a target project objective. This is reflected in the quote below:

*“We integrated the project so the basic needs of the country were met, the donor needs were met, the provincial authorities were on board, and the cities developed their own priorities. We impacted a greater distance.”*  
(Project Manager, Indonesia)

This finding is also supported in the literature. Yalegama et al. (2016) mentioned “enabling environment” as a critical success factor for ID projects and Ika et al. (2012) and Ika (2015) noted that project alignment should be obtained in the front-end of the project and in particular in the project initiation phase.

However, project alignment can only be truly ascertained as a project evolves and stakeholders begin to interact. This alignment-by-evolution process highlights the importance of a project’s ability to take an experimental approach in both project design and implementation. This process is consistent with the incremental/experimental approach suggested by Baser and Morgan (2008) and Hobbes (2014) and is captured by the following quote:

*“At one point we said wait, let’s test this in one district first. It was easier to control and it was a good idea. We got good results. It helped clarify a few things and they were able to expand it.”*  
(Technical Expert, Sri Lanka)

The Alignment condition will shift throughout the course of projects, therefore designing mechanisms to maintain alignment is equally important. The projects obtained and maintained the Alignment condition through a fit with multiple stakeholder interests and multi-stakeholder planning/design. Respondents gave an interesting perspective on the role of local coordinators (We note that coordination has been shown as a critical success factor for ID projects, see Ika et al., 2012 and Ika, 2015). Coordinators provided real-time information that project managers could then use to ensure the project continued to stay strategically positioned. Assigning a more strategic role to the local coordinator is an interesting project management approach that surfaced in this research. Involving the coordinators in this role however requires including them in the early design process of the projects. Typically in ID projects, coordinators are not involved in the early design stage. This research highlights an additional strategic value of involving the coordinators in this early role.

#### 7.4. Adaptation

The Adaptation condition captures interview responses that mention how the project managed to obtain/maintain a compatible fit with its environment and what resources were brought in to do so. Unlike the Alignment condition above, which addresses more strategic positioning, this condition

addresses the flexibility of project structures allowing it to evolve and adjust over time. Adaptation is all about the project’s ability to monitor not only risk, but also opportunity, and be able to act on information in a timely manner. Monitoring for opportunity and risk is best done by those closest to project implementation (e.g., Ika, 2012). It requires an intimate knowledge of the local context, sector context and project management approach. This supports the recruitment and training of more experienced local project coordinators. These coordinators are best positioned to provide critical real-time information to project directors who may be located off site or frequently travelling. It also makes a case for decentralised authority structures to allow project staff to act on information in a timely manner.

The adaptability of the implementing agency came through primarily in comments around the ability of the project team to act independently to find solutions to problems. Teams were given the space to design innovative solutions to challenges and adjust the plan as new opportunities emerged.

*“We felt the staff had confidence in us and we had the flexibility to capitalise on opportunities. We had lots of room to maneuver and we could adapt the project as we went along to match the evolution of the government and context.”*  
(Technical Expert, Vietnam)

*“At one point the city lacked funding to continue the land information system. The Mayor of Nam Dinh at the time sat down and spoke with the World Bank and the Swiss Development Cooperation who were also working in the city at the time. He arranged for a meeting to discuss how they could support the completion of the land information management system. In the end the Swiss supported the land surveying and the World Bank provided the equipment, the Canadians continued to provide the expertise.”*  
(Project Coordinator, Vietnam)

The projects obtained and maintained the Adaptation condition through monitoring and support mechanisms that they used to fit the changing circumstances. The ability to act on new ideas was encouraged in all four projects. Interestingly, the responses to questions around project adaptability were less about resources or management processes but more about the management styles of the project staff (Shenhar and Dvir, 2007). More specifically, project adaptability appeared to be linked to the ability of project staff to motivate and empower teams, facilitate relationships, provide guidance, solve problems, be resourceful and act quickly. It was less about physical resources and more about providing the right mix of structure, flexibility and learning while doing (Korten, 1980; Ika, 2012; Ramalingam, 2015).

Table 7 demonstrates the link between the meta-conditions and the framework conditions. By cross referencing the framework responses with the responses that were coded to the meta-conditions, a picture of why, how and who contributes to project success appears. To illustrate the strongest

Table 7  
Links between framework and meta-conditions.

Meta-conditions	Process (how meta-conditions are achieved)	Link to the framework conditions (% of respondent answers <sup>a</sup> )			
		Structural context	Beneficiary institution	Project institution	Project management
Multi-stakeholder commitment	Attainability of objectives (strengthened Commitment)	1 (5%)	6 (30%)	12 (60%)	12 (60%)
	Demonstrating project value (strengthened Commitment)	2 (10%)	16 (80%)	9 (45%)	4 (20%)
Collaboration	Ability of stakeholders (enabled effective Collaboration)	1 (5%)	13 (65%)	16 (80%)	8 (40%)
	Inclusiveness (enabled effective Collaboration)	1 (5%)	12 (60%)	18 (90%)	11 (55%)
Alignment	Design (contributed to Alignment)	5 (25%)	5 (25%)	9 (45%)	15 (75%)
	Mutual interest (contributed to Alignment )	17 (85%)	7 (35%)	13 (65%)	6 (30%)
Adaptation	Monitoring (contributed to Adaptation)	1 (5%)	9 (45%)	15 (75%)	16 (80%)
	Support (contributed to Adaptation)	7 (35%)	9 (45%)	19 (95%)	17 (85%)

<sup>a</sup>These percentages are not meant to support any statistical test of hypotheses but are offered as an indicator of the overall perceived importance of a particular success condition.

<sup>a</sup> These percentages are not meant to support any statistical test of hypotheses but are offered as an indicator of the overall perceived importance of a particular success condition.

framework contributing conditions, a threshold of 70% was used and highlighted in Table 7.

## 8. Validation workshop findings and implications for project management theory and practice

To validate the findings above, especially the framework conditions perceived as *less* important, and to apply the meta-conditions to current management practice, a one-and-a-half hour workshop brought together seven project practitioners from the implementing agency.

### 8.1. Workshop findings: framework conditions

While the participants found the framework conditions truly reflective of their project management practice, they agreed that weak results on structural conditions like legal and regulatory frameworks (C1.1), financial resources (C1.2), and institutional conditions for the beneficiary like capability to manage diversity (C2.2.4) and capability to adapt knowledge/skills (C2.2.5) were likely due to the smaller sample size of some categories of interviewees. For example, had more project

beneficiaries been interviewed, capability to manage diversity, although difficult to measure, would have been stronger. The weak result on institutional conditions for the implementing agency in the area of experience in the country and knowledge of context (C3.1) did not strike the workshop participants as surprising. They stated that full understanding of the country context was not feasible with the limited time frame of the projects (2–5 years). Workshop participants pointed to the importance of strong local stakeholders and project adaptability to make up for this “context” knowledge gap.

### 8.2. Workshop findings: meta-conditions

The reaction by workshop participants to the four meta-conditions was positive. When asked to apply the conditions to a current project, one participant stated she could see immediately in which area her current project was struggling. Workshop participants unanimously agreed that for local government development projects to be considered a success, high levels of multi-stakeholder commitment, collaboration, alignment, and adaptation are not only *likely to be present*

(as the researchers initially suggested) but they are in fact *necessary* for a project to be considered a success.

### 8.3. Implications for theory

Overall, this paper makes three key contributions to the literature. Firstly, by going beyond the lists of project success factors and highlighting the importance of structural, institutional and managerial success *conditions* (Turner, 2004; Wateridge, 1995), this research provides more contextual information around already identified success factors such as supervision, monitoring, design, coordination, consultations, understanding the project environment, and competency of project staff. The research also highlights the potential for success conditions to occur in the following categories in order for an international development (ID) project to thrive: the contextual environment, accountability and public participation, beneficiary institution capacity, implementing organization capacity, leadership, monitoring, design, and stakeholder coordination.

Secondly, the paper identifies multi-stakeholder commitment, collaboration, alignment, and adaptation as meta-conditions and, thus, proposes that high levels of these are necessary for ID projects to succeed; these four meta-conditions not only capture the structural, institutional and project management conditions above but they also clearly link the aforementioned success factors with project context; hence, the research also adds to the literature.

Thirdly and lastly, the research adds support to the Hirschman's (1967) idea that there are both initial success conditions (success conditions that would “occur in advance of the project”) and emergent conditions (the success conditions that would occur “in the wake of the project”) (p. 146). For instance, the involvement of certain enabling organizations did not initially appear as relevant to project success but their important contributions were only revealed after project implementation had started. This is also illustrated by the monitoring tools which ultimately emerged as useful for motivating beneficiaries, brokering commitment, and maintaining proper alignment with community and stakeholder needs. In other words, project monitoring contributed to project success conditions in ways not originally intended by the project designers. Also, multi-stakeholder commitment and alignment could both occur in advance while collaboration and adaptation could both occur in the wake of the project. Thus, uncertainty surrounds the occurrence and timing of project success conditions. As Hirschman (1967) notes, we are confronted with the “essence of the project design dilemma”: we do not know whether it is realistic to expect success conditions to “occur in advance or in the wake of the project.” (p. 146). Therefore, to account for both initial and emergent success conditions, instead of asking: what are the conditions that enable project success, we should henceforth ask: what is occurring in the project setting that prompts us to believe that project success will occur?

### 8.4. Implications for practice

As mentioned above, this research proposes that high levels of multi-stakeholder commitment, collaboration, alignment,

and adaptation are necessary for capacity building projects to succeed. In a manner similar to other professions like meteorology or medicine, project management can also benefit from the use of “diagnostic” conditions to gauge the state of their projects and make changes to increase the likelihood of a positive outcome. Project managers can use the presence or absence of the conditions to assess the likelihood that success will (or will not) occur and adjust their project practice accordingly. For instance, the presence of strong alignment and adaptability conditions may indicate the possibility of novel adjustments to changing environmental circumstances or, as mentioned earlier, indicate the potential of a project intervention to expand or scale out; the presence of strong commitment and collaboration conditions may indicate opportunities for beneficiary ownership of a potential developmental change. Through the identification of meta-conditions, the research has elicited practical knowledge around project success and a more user friendly set of success conditions that can be applied and designed into future ID projects.

Let's take for example Khang and Moe's success factor “effective stakeholder consultations”. How does this factor *really* contribute to project success? The results of this paper tell us the following: consultations will better align the project to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders (alignment), consultations will help build trust and enable innovative problem-solving (collaboration), consultations can improve stakeholder buy-in and ownership of the project (commitment), consultations will help mitigate risk (adaptation). Additionally, information about who should be consulted also provides more practical insight for the ID project manager. In the case of local government projects, this paper finds that consultations should include beneficiary staff, political champions, and various community stakeholders as each group contributes differently to the success conditions listed above. With this further understanding on how consultations contribute to project success, project managers can now conceptualise activities and target stakeholders to enable the success conditions.

Let's take another Khang and Moe example, the success factor “competency of project staff”. This paper provided additional information on which competencies led to successful projects including, the ability to manage diversity, the ability to engage stakeholders, the ability to troubleshoot concrete solutions to complex problems, the ability to apply the appropriate guidance or structure, and finally the ability to foster learning and leadership. Using this knowledge, project managers can select their staff, project experts, and potential beneficiaries in a way that will enable project success.

Furthermore, in this research, Ika et al.'s (2012) success factor “monitoring” emerged not only as a compliance instrument but as an interesting motivational tool for project stakeholders. Monitoring also emerged as an important contributor to project flexibility by providing managers with the information needed to adapt their projects accordingly. Ika et al.'s (2012) success factor “design” contributed strongly to the alignment condition, illustrating how early planning with the right stakeholders does indeed help strategically position the project within the broader environment when done well.



Diallo and Thuillier's (2005) "trust and communication" success factors were also further contextualised in this paper. Positive trust and communication develop through collaboration, teamwork and interaction. A project manager can apply techniques and design activities to enable positive interactions that build trust, knowing that these interactions are fundamental to the successful emergence of new ideas and solutions leading to development. Finally, we note that the results of our research were enough to generate two internal workshop discussions around success conditions for the implementing agency's overall portfolio of international programmes.

The meta-conditions that emerged in this paper provide future project managers working on local government development projects with more contextual information on the stakeholders and processes that help spark success. Successful approaches, techniques and processes were identified to increase beneficiary ownership, project relevance, impact and sustainability. Practical insight into management practices (i.e. participatory design, incremental planning, enabling organizational involvement, etc.) that lead to success can now be applied in future project contexts.

The research also provided a snapshot of success conditions from a range of project stakeholders. The beneficiary institutions brought leadership, commitment, and the motivation to change. The implementing agency created the "umbrella" space enabling project success to occur by managing a multitude of stakeholders and introducing new ones, providing the right expertise, and maintaining project momentum through project management support. Enabling institutions helped mitigate risk, broaden impact, and improve chances for sustainability. Thus, knowledge on the specific technical capacities of project beneficiaries, project technical experts, and project staff also figured prominently in this research. Leadership ability and project management skills were two competency areas that emerged as strong contributors to project success. PM training and leadership ability (i.e. fostering interaction, communication, and consensus, effectively navigating unpredictability, diagnosing situations

quickly, changing, adapting and developing new approaches on the fly, building and contributing to high performance self-managing teams, etc.) are recommendations emerging from this research. Increasing leadership and project management training for project beneficiaries may contribute significantly to project success. By further understanding the relationship between project setting and project success, project managers can more readily identify which techniques, abilities, and stakeholders are contributing to (or hindering) the project, and they can adjust their management approach accordingly.

Fig. 2 displays our final framework for measuring ID project success conditions.

## 9. Limitations

This research focused on most successful versus less successful projects, not successful projects versus failed projects as would have been ideal to avoid any success bias. A comparative study on project failures vs. project successes would strengthen the validity of the findings. Additionally, the research limited the case sample data to four projects funded by one donor agency and implemented by one execution organization. Increasing the number of case projects across a variety of organizations would lead to a more robust contribution to project management research. The research was also limited with its thematic focus. Case samples were all local government capacity building projects and it is likely not all conditions or sub-conditions would apply in different thematic or organizational contexts. The research collected data primarily from project managers and technical experts. A more diverse sample of interview respondents, including additional project beneficiaries and donor agency supervisors would have added variety to the perspectives of a project's success. Also, by broadening the scope of the research, new success conditions could be identified. Finally, additional research on the interplay between project settings, initial success conditions, emergent success conditions, and their influences on project success dimensions would add to the findings.

## 10. Conclusion

The paper analysed success conditions of four local government capacity building international development (ID) projects in four countries: Ghana, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam. Triangulating the data from twenty interviews (from a range of project practitioners) with written project documentation, the paper revealed that structural, institutional, and project management conditions could enable project success. Key success conditions include *Structural Conditions*: contextual environment and accountability/public participation; *Institutional Conditions*: beneficiary institution capacity and implementing organization capacity; and finally *Project Management Conditions*: leadership, monitoring, design, and stakeholder coordination. These were termed the "framework conditions" as they were derived from the literature.

The paper also differentiated between initial success conditions, i.e., success conditions that occurred in advance of

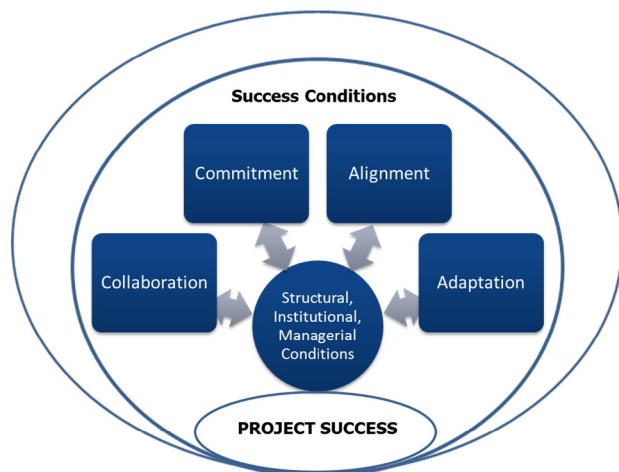


Fig. 2. Final measurement framework for international development project success conditions.

the project and emergent success conditions, i.e., those that occurred in the wake of the project. Then, the research drew out another set of success conditions that came up from the data. These were termed “meta-conditions” as they appeared to incorporate not only the structural, institutional, and project management conditions but also provided a stronger link between project context and success factors such as supervision, monitoring, design, coordination, consultations, understanding the project environment, competency of project staff. Thus, we propose that high levels of multi-stakeholder commitment, collaboration, alignment, and adaptation are necessary for ID projects to succeed.

Broadening the contextual scope of project management research and measuring projects within the project context provides an interesting perspective on the nature of project contributions to the development process. While using projects (small, temporary endeavours) as delivery mechanisms to drive development seemed somewhat questionable and counter-intuitive, the research findings have left the authors with the impression that, although projects do not have the necessary control or influence to “drive” development, they are indeed quite well suited to “trigger” development. Using an analogy, if the process of development is like an uncontrollable fire, projects can be thought of as highly specialized sparks. Projects cannot necessarily control the direction or the strength of the development, but projects can certainly initiate a chain reaction. The observation that projects best serve development initiatives when viewed as highly specialized catalysts for development, repositions the focus of performance measurement on the enabling mechanisms for development (and less on final results). This also supports the notion that performance measurement should indeed focus much more on the conditions that enable development. Through a deeper understanding of these conditions, project managers can increase the likelihood that their spark will result in a fire. Thus, we put the ability of projects to deliver into context and praise their power to trigger development through understanding project settings and success conditions in particular. Are researchers and practitioners up to the task?

### Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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## Appendix 1. Interview guide

1. Participant information
  - 1.1. What was your role on the project?
  - 1.2. How long did you work on the project?
2. Project success information
  - 2.1. On a scale of 1 to 5 where: 1 = strongly disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree and 5 = strongly agree with the statements, how would you assess the following project criteria?
    - 2.1.1. The project objectives were well suited to the needs of the country.
    - 2.1.2. The project objectives were well suited to the needs of the beneficiaries.
    - 2.1.3. The project was completed on time.
    - 2.1.4. The project met its objectives.
    - 2.1.5. The project budget was well managed.
    - 2.1.6. The project built institutional capacity within the country.
    - 2.1.7. The project results will continue after the project ends.
  - 2.2. Using the same scale, how would you assess the overall success of your project? Why? How do you personally define a successful project?
3. Structural conditions
  - 3.1. Legal/regulatory frameworks
    - 3.1.1. Please elaborate on the national regulatory context that may have enabled the success of your project? This can include any legal mandates, relationships with central ministries, etc.
  - 3.2. Financial resources
    - 3.2.1. Other than CIDA funding, what sources of financial revenue enabled the success of the project?
  - 3.3. Contextual environment
    - 3.3.1. Were there any other non-governmental (private sector, associations, NGOs, academic, etc.) institutions that helped make the project successful?
    - 3.3.2. In your opinion, were there other factors (historic, geographic, demographic, environmental, and/or political) that contributed to the project's success?
4. Institutional conditions (beneficiary)
  - 4.1. Accountability and public participation:
    - 4.1.1. Please describe the participatory decision making and community engagement activities local governments engaged in throughout the project. Did this contribute to its success?
  - 4.2. Staff and leadership capacity
    - 4.2.1. How did the local government demonstrate commitment to the project? Why were they selected? Were there any individuals or circumstances that appeared to motivate staff and leaders to engage in the project?
    - 4.2.2. Which new skills were acquired? How was the improvement measured?
    - 4.2.3. Were any new strategic relationships created? Did you notice new linkages with other

departments or other external agencies? How was information shared between these agencies? What was the result of the linkages?

4.2.4. How did the local government beneficiaries adapt Canadian technical knowledge to develop new processes for their institution? Who was involved in this process?

4.2.5. What mechanisms did project participants use to gain consensus and build trust between stakeholders?

## 5. Institutional conditions (implementing agency)

### 5.1. Organizational capacity to implement the project

5.1.1. How many years' experience did the project organization have in the beneficiary country? Did they have a previous relationship with the beneficiary and if so, for how many years?

5.1.2. Did the project agency possess sound governance systems (management, supervision, accountability)?

5.1.3. Was the technical expertise provided by the organization a good match with the development challenge/beneficiary organization?

5.1.4. What activities took place to engage key stakeholders and institutions?

5.1.5. Did the project leverage/broker resources (\$\$, expertise) from other institutions or stakeholders?

5.1.6. How did the project organization adapt to sudden change? Give an example of a change event and how it was managed.

5.1.7. What type of learning approaches were applied to build the technical capacity of local government beneficiaries (tools, methodologies)? What methodologies or activities achieved this best?

5.1.8. How did the project organization create new knowledge and promote internal learning?

5.1.9. What methods were applied to manage diversity and encourage collective decision making?

## 6. Management conditions

### 6.1. Project management

6.1.1. What roles did of local staff or local expertise play in the project?

6.1.2. To what extent was local culture considered in the project?

6.1.3. Did the project team undergo any change in personnel?

6.1.4. Did the project have a strong steering committee?

6.1.5. To what extent did the project experience political involvement, and what is good or bad for the project?

6.1.6. Did the project have a strong national supervisor?

6.1.7. Did the leadership and ability of project manager (s) contribute to the success of the project? In what way?

6.1.8. Did the project design contribute to the success of the project? In what way?

6.1.9. Was a monitoring system applied to measure project progress? If so please describe it. Did it contribute to the success the project?

6.1.10. What type of support (administrative, operational, etc.) did the project management team provide to project stakeholders throughout the course of the project? Did it contribute to the success the project?

6.1.11. What kind of communication tools and interaction processes were applied? Did it contribute to the success the project?

## Wrap up

- What do you think is the difference between conditions and factors? Please explain.
- What special factors and conditions do you believe contributed to the success of the project? Please explain why you feel this way.
- Generally what are success conditions for local government projects? How does this knowledge help in delivering successful projects?
- Would you like to add any additional comments to the answers you provided above?

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