

**CONCEPT PAPER**

**DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR THE SUCCESS OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS IN THE MALDIVES**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The paper concentrates on International Development (ID) projects implemented in the Maldives, an island nation in the Indian Ocean. Some of the critical issues reported on these projects include failure of contractors and consultants to deliver goods and services, non-compliance issues on financial management / reporting practices, and project delays. The overarching central question guiding the study is “How can project success be achieved in ID projects implemented in the Maldives?” This paper seeks to assess the challenges facing projects, explore the critical success factors, and project success criteria of ID projects in the Maldives. Furthermore, the study will look into developing a framework for the success of ID projects in the Maldives. It is intended to be carried out based on a qualitative case study approach. The study hopes to capture the views of beneficiaries, project teams, and donors, and thus, help resolve the misalignment between theoretical frameworks and practice.*

**Keywords:** critical success factors; international development projects; project success.

**INTRODUCTION**

Nations around the globe are striving to achieve growth for the betterment of the livelihoods of the people and to increase the standard of living of the communities. International Development (ID) projects aim to reduce poverty in a sustainable manner, empower communities, assist economic growth, and build social infrastructure of countries (Walker, 2016). Inevitably, nations differing in terms of their stage of development and income inequality still persist. The

World Bank classifies countries into distinct categories based on national income per capita: a) high-income, b) upper-middle-income, and c) low-income countries (McConnell, Brue & Flynn, 2015). High income countries or the developed countries include the United States, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and most countries of the western Europe, while the rest of the countries of the world (in the middle and low-income category) are considered developing countries (McConnell et al., 2015). However, the World Bank ceased to differentiate between “developed” and “developing” countries in the presentation of its 2016 edition of World Development Indicators (see World Bank, 2016). Nevertheless, the authors have distinguished between developing and developed countries, for the purpose of this paper, due to their prominence in the literature.

Many developing countries are still relying on foreign aid for economic growth (Dowling & Valenzuela, 2010). Foreign aid (i.e., Official Development Assistance, ODA) is the aid provided by a government to assist the intended economic development of a developing country (OECD, 2016b). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list of ODA recipients are classified into: a) least developed countries, b) other low-income countries, c) lower middle-income countries, and d) upper middle-income countries. Aid is channeled to developing countries through bilateral or multilateral sources. According to the “Development Aid at a Glance” statistics (for 2014) for developing countries, Afghanistan was the highest ODA recipient with a total of US\$4,823 million, followed by Vietnam receiving US\$4,218 million (OECD, 2016a). European Union institutions and International Development Association of the World Bank were the top multilateral donors contributing US\$16,389 million and US\$10,262 million respectively.

ID projects are a standard *modus operandi* practiced by multilateral sources to provide aid in the form of loans or grants to developing countries. Multilateral donors have various methods of project formulation and implementation. For example, the World Bank designs the project with the consultation of the stakeholders, especially the recipient country, and empowers a project team on the ground to deliver the project with the role of the Bank being supervision (Ika, 2015). ID projects are in most cases implemented by the government of the recipient country. ID project management becomes increasingly important to successfully implement these projects due to the involvement of high profile stakeholders. There are, however, many criticisms on the governments with regards to ID project management.

The Maldives, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, can provide insights into ID project management in a small island developing state. The archipelago consists of about 1,190 islands, but only about 200 islands are inhabited. It is considered an upper middle-income country (OECD, 2015). With a population of 401,000,

the country has a gross national income per capita (Atlas method) of US\$6,410 (World Bank, 2014). Being a developing country, the Maldives receives foreign aid in different modes. According to the Maldives' state budget proposed to the parliament for the fiscal year 2016, the total forecast foreign aid expected for the year 2016 was US\$307.21 million. This included US\$180.24 million for ID project loans, US\$76.97 million for ID project grants, and US\$50 million as budget support (Ministry of Finance and Treasury, 2015). The portfolio of ID projects in the Maldives comprises projects on infrastructure, harbors, sewerage and drainage networks, environment, energy, fisheries, agriculture and governance. The Ministry of Finance and Treasury is the executing agency for all ID projects, while the relevant line ministry acts as the implementing agency. In most cases, a Project Management Unit (PMU) is set up within the implementing agency mandated with the overall responsibility of implementing the project. PMU is staffed by either government employees or donor funded contract staff (Yamin & Sim, 2016).

### ***Issues in ID Projects in the Maldives***

ID projects in the Maldives have a fair share of issues. Critical issues impeding successful implementation of ID projects have been reported by the Auditor General's Office of the Maldives during the audit of some of the ID projects implemented by various government agencies. One of the most frequent issues reported is the failure on the part of the contractor and consultant in delivering goods or services. Taking a case, for example, the Maldives' environmental management project funded by the World Bank, contracted a local party to construct and supply a waste transfer vessel within 10 months. Though, a time extension of 45 days was given, the contractor still failed to deliver. Subsequently, the procurement was put on hold and was not completed.

Other issues highlighted in the audit reports include non-compliance issues such as the implementing agencies not submitting the required reports and plans to donors on time (Auditor General's Office, 2015a, 2015f), not recording financial transactions properly, and not following the guidelines on maintenance of fixed assets (Auditor General's Office, 2015c, 2015g). Furthermore, project delays due to political reasons were of major concern. For example, it was stated in the financial statement audit report (for the financial year 2014) the original start date of "Strengthening Institutional Capacity of Key National Trade Facilitation Agencies to Deepen Maldives Capacity to Competitively Engage in International Trade in Goods and Services Project" had to be delayed due to the presidential elections in 2013, where policy was not finalized until the new administration came into power and a tripartite arrangement being agreed subsequently (Auditor General's Office, 2015f, p.3). Hence, the project completion was delayed and a time extension for the project had been agreed by the donor. A summary of the

issues reported in the financial statement audit reports of ID projects audited and published by the Auditor General's Office in 2015 are presented in Table 1.

### *From Issues to Empirical Research*

Based on the issues highlighted, a research is necessary and it can use a qualitative approach to explore the success of ID projects as perceived by stakeholders. It can assess the challenges facing ID projects, explore the Critical Success Factors (CSFs), and thereafter identify the project success criteria. A framework for the success of ID projects can be developed.

For a qualitative study, Creswell (2007) suggests to have an overarching central question that covers the entire study followed by issue sub-questions and procedural sub-questions. Accordingly, the overarching central question is: *How can project success be achieved in ID projects implemented in the Maldives?* The issue sub-questions are: 1) What are the perceptions of stakeholders of ID projects on project success criteria? 2) What are the perceived factors that contribute to successful implementation of ID projects?

**Table 1:** Summary of Issues of ID Projects Audited by the Auditor General's Office in 2015  
Source: Auditor General's Office (2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e, 2015f, 2015g)

#	Project	Donor	Implementing Ministry	Reported Issues
1	Clean Energy for Climate Mitigation Project	World Bank	Environment and Energy	Delay of delivery of specifications by consultants
2	Building Institutional Capacity of Ministry of Economic Development and National Implementing Agencies to Implement National Trade Agenda	United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)	Economic Development	Failure to develop and implement standard operating procedures according to work plan and failure to complete proposals for Tier 2 project Failure to submit some financial and narrative reports to the donor on time
3	Strengthening Institutional Capacity of Key National Trade Facilitation Agencies to Deepen Maldives' Capacity to Competitively Engage in International Trade in Goods and Service	UNOPS	Economic Development	Failure to submit some financial and narrative reports to the donor on time Project kick-off delayed due to political reasons

**Table 1:** Summary of Issues of ID Projects Audited by the Auditor General's Office in 2015  
(*cont*)

4	Maldives' Environmental Management Project	World Bank	Environment and Energy	Failure of the contractor to construct and supply a Waste Transfer Vessel on time Failed to achieve the objective of the project Improper financial management – failure to record cash advances for travel as well as to maintain adequate records Failure to maintain the fixed asset register, improper classification and recording of assets, omission of recording few assets, and failed periodic physical verification
5	Preparation for Accelerating Sustainable Private Investments in Renewable Energy Project	World Bank	Environment and Energy	Contractor's failure to deliver the workshop on Implementation of Renewable Energy Integration Plan Failure to include fine or penalties in the contract with the contractor for delayed deliverables or non-delivery
6	Public Financial Management System Strengthening Project	World Bank	Finance and Treasury	Failure to submit the Project Implementation Plan to the donor on time
7	Wetland Conservation and Coral Reef Monitoring Project	World Bank	Environment and Energy	Failure to maintain the fixed asset register – not updated since 2013, some assets are not recorded, and failed periodic physical verification

Further to the overarching central question and issue sub-questions, procedural sub-questions will assist in achieving the objectives and linking the research objectives and research questions when collecting data (Creswell, 2007). The procedural sub-questions that will assist in this case study research are: 1) How might issues of ID projects in the Maldives be described? 2) What themes emerge from identifying the perceived CSFs of ID projects in the Maldives? 3) What themes emerge on project success criteria of ID projects? and 4) How would the emerging themes be interpreted within project success/critical theories?

### **CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS AND PROJECT SUCCESS**

Developing a framework for the success of ID projects will be instrumental for countries such as the Maldives. The theoretical insights from the relevant

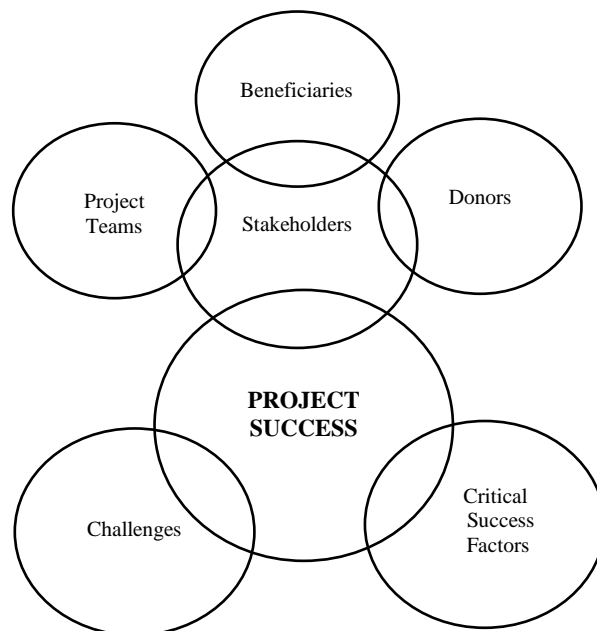
researchers will be useful for this purpose. Among the pioneering researchers of success factors, Pinto and Slevin (1987) have developed a ten-factor list which is found to be useful. They suggested the “diagnostic behavioral instrument” which measured success factors from a project manager’s perspective. They asserted the success factors to be project mission, top management support, schedule and plans, client consultation, personnel, technical tasks, client acceptance, monitoring and feedback, communication, and troubleshooting. Davis (2014) observed that contemporary researchers were building on Pinto and Slevin’s work in contrast to developing new sets of success factors. CSF frameworks emerged during the 1990s to 2000s and recognized the importance of internal and external stakeholders, and continued to be the focus in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Davis, 2014).

CSFs and project success factors or criteria are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature. However, it should be noted that these two terms are not synonymous and have distinguished meanings. CSFs, in general terms, are events, conditions, drivers, or elements required for the attainment of goals or objectives, while project success criteria refer to the measures which will determine whether the project attained its intended goal. The well-known criteria of measuring project success are time, cost and quality, popularly known as the “iron triangle” (Atkinson, 1999). However, several contemporary researchers suggested that project success should be measured in a broader aspect (Brière, Tremblay & Daou, 2015; Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006; Ika & Hodgson, 2014). For example, Lim and Mohamed (1999) suggested to gauge project success on a micro-viewpoint (criterion to be “completion”) and a macro-viewpoint (criteria to be “completion” and “satisfaction”). Hence, researchers (such, as de Wit, 1988; Nawi, Abd. Rahman & Ibrahim, 2012; Shenhar, Dvir, Levy & Maltz, 2001) have highlighted the importance of considering the stakeholders’ viewpoint. In an ID project, for example, a donor may view a project satisfactory while the beneficiaries may not have been fully satisfied with the outcome of the project. Therefore, project stakeholders may have contradictory views on the success of a project. Stakeholders’ viewpoints need to be captured in order to better understand their perspectives, which will in turn lead to a more accurate determination of project success.

In fact, CSFs have been studied rather extensively in the field of project management and in the context of ID projects (Ika, Diallo & Thuillier, 2012; Khang & Moe, 2008; Kwak, 2002; Vickland & Nieuwenhuijs, 2005; Yamin & Sim, 2016). However, these studies focused on identifying CSFs quantitatively. Due to the complex nature of ID projects, it is necessary to study CSFs based on a qualitative approach (Ika et al., 2012; Yamin & Sim, 2016). Ika and Hodgson (2014) suggested to view ID projects from a critical perspective to better understand the nature of projects. To address the gap of lack of qualitative studies, Ika and Donnelly (2017) conducted a qualitative case study and looked

into four ID projects in Ghana, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. They interviewed twenty practitioners of these projects and asserted that structural, institutional and project management conditions would contribute to project success. Structural conditions include contextual environment and accountability or public participation; institutional conditions being the capacity of beneficiary institution and implementing institution; while project management conditions include leadership, monitoring, design, and stakeholder coordination (Ika & Donnelly, 2017). They asserted that a high-level of multi-stakeholder support is required in terms of commitment, collaboration, alignment, and adaptation for projects to be successful.

Figure 1 shows a concept map summarizing the main concepts of this study. It may be referred to as a free-form concept map as the overlapping circles show non-hierarchical connections between the concepts (Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). Concept map is a useful tool to frame a qualitative research study, reduce qualitative data, analyze themes, interconnections, and present findings (Daley, 2004). The following map, however, may also be referred to as a mind map because it lacks the usual components of a concept map, such as linking words, arrows, and a clear hierarchy (Wheeldon & Faubert, 2009). It is considered a fluid diagram as the concepts and their interconnections may evolve during the research.



**Figure 1:** Project Success Concept Map

Kerzner recently highlighted the need to emphasize sustainability and value. He offered the future definition of a project to be “a collection of sustainable business value scheduled for realization” (Kerzner, 2015, p. 46). Likewise, he

opined that business value maybe the primary criterion in defining project success. The traditional definition of project success revolves around completing projects within the time, scope and cost constraints, while the future definition may focus on “achieving the desired business value within the competing constraints” (Kerzner, 2015, p. 46). However, researchers have contended that project success can only be perceived and is subjective (de Wit, 1988; Lim & Mohamed, 1999).

## **PRACTICAL PROBLEMS AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN PROJECT MANAGEMENT RESEARCH**

ID projects are complex in nature as compared to conventional projects. Perhaps, due to the complexity, challenges in ID projects are commonly reported in the literature. For the purpose of the study, the challenges need to be classified into practical problems and methodological flaws observed in the ID project research.

Perhaps, the most frequently cited issue on ID projects and projects in general is project failure. Reports on ID project failures are so common that it has become rather a norm and not an unusual occurrence (Hermano, López-Paredes, Martín-Cruz & Pajares, 2013; Ika et al., 2012). The Independent Evaluation Group of the World Bank reported that a quarter of the projects and programs funded by the World Bank was a failure (Kusek, Prestidge & Hamilton, 2013). Furthermore, the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank reported that only 50% of their projects in Africa was successfully completed. Perhaps, one main reason for the failures can be attributed to the fact that donors are constantly pressing the governments to show positive results from donor funds even with the limited capacity of the implementing agencies (Kusek et al., 2013). Contrarily, Julian (2016) argued that there is a fundamental failure in understanding different stakeholders’ viewpoints on what it means by “impact” due to the varying mental models and competing interests. This raises the question of how project success is being measured. Is there an objective criterion to measure success? Can the definition of “success” mean the same thing to the various stakeholders involved? These questions lead to the methodological fundamentals of research on project success.

With the advancements in technology and infrastructure, project management evolved as a field of social practice in the aftermath of the second World War in the 1950s (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006). Project management in ID branched out from conventional project management during the same time and both conventional and ID project management researchers heavily subscribed to functional, instrumental rationality, objectivity, reductionism, and universal validity (Ika & Hodgson, 2014). However, researchers (such as, Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006; Ika & Hodgson, 2014) argued that there is a fundamental error in



this traditional “mainstream” approach of project management and an alternative approach is required. For example, much of the project management literature and research has focused on improving traditional models and identifying CSFs, assuming that such an idealistic objective model existed in the project management practice (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006; Söderlund, 2004).

In fact, Packendorff (1995), criticized traditional project management research by stating that project management was viewed as a general theory and that projects were considered as “tools”. Ivory and Alderman (2009) found that traditional project management is rooted in the logic that application of tools and techniques rationally, based on command and control determines the outcome. Subsequently, Packendorff (2013) suggested to explore alternative theoretical perspectives considering “project” as a metaphor; phenomena of projects as cases; and perspective and audience of the research. This notion was built on to his earlier proposition of constructing middle range theories according to the types of projects, focusing on research on expectations, actions, and project learning (Packendorff, 1995).

In view of the need for a critical perspective for projects, Hodgson and Cicmil (2006) suggested three main recommendations for future research. They are – to view project and program management as a non-neutral social phenomenon, occurring as a social construction between individuals and groups resulting from their interaction; to re-analyze the issue of performance of developing knowledge and practices such as CSFs and seeking beyond the iron triangle measure of project success; to better understand local contexts, lived experiences, stakeholders’ self-perceptions and how they impact their social role. Ika and Hodgson (2014) believed that ID project research should be explored from a critical social theory, considering the viewpoints of post-development, Habermasian, Foucauldian, and neo-Marxism.

## **BRIEF METHODOLOGY CONCEPT PROPOSED FOR THE STUDY**

The intended research can be divided into three major phases. The first phase will focus on conducting an in-depth literature review on ID project success and critical success factors and in turn developing a robust methodology. The second phase will consist of data collection, data analysis, and data validation. The final phase will be the write up of the case study report.

To achieve the objectives, a qualitative case study approach with a holistic multiple case design will be followed. The qualitative case study will allow the researcher to engage in an inductive investigative strategy, the researcher being the primary research instrument, to find out the meaning and understanding of the respondents of the research on the research questions and will lead to a rich,

descriptive account at the end (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Yin (2011) asserted that a qualitative study may not have a fixed design and the researcher may customize the design according to the study conducted.

Case study method has been selected based on the epistemological consideration to allow for a rich description of the phenomenon. Furthermore, a qualitative approach is preferred to explain how participants (mainly beneficiaries and local implementing teams) view and hold the meaning of the phenomenon (project value and success). This is to challenge the existing frameworks of quantitative methodologies where previous studies have focused on viewing the phenomenon objectively. The research will follow the epistemological philosophy of constructivism where it is held that knowledge is constructed based on the meanings given by humans to the subject. Moreover, the research supports the view of “multiple reality” where respondents may have subjective views on the studied phenomenon and which may still be valid.

The project will be the unit of analysis, and a few ID projects implemented in the Maldives will be selected. Three methods of data collection are proposed. They are: 1) In-depth interviews will be conducted with beneficiaries of ID projects, local implementing teams, and regulators. 2) Documentation will be analyzed with a special focus on reports published by the donor evaluating the project performance. Other project documents will also be sought. 3) Direct observation is proposed – project sites will be visited and data will be collected on observation basis. Emphasis will be given to travel to the islands (small communities outside the capital city) where ID projects are being implemented, to obtain a firsthand account of project outcome and output.

Interviews will be transcribed verbatim and will be analyzed by the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Collection of evidence from multiple sources as described above will allow for data triangulation. A case study protocol as suggested by Yin (2011) will be followed. Furthermore, a case study database will be created and maintained to keep trail of the evidence collected and the protocols.

It is envisaged that interviewees will consist of medium to high-level stakeholders who have the knowledge and experience of ID projects in the Maldives. Around 30 interviews are planned to be carried out. It is expected that the proposed methodology will assist to capture interpretations of stakeholders, especially the beneficiary communities by allowing them to voice out their thoughts. This will enable the research to identify their values and contribute to creating new values for the society in terms of designing, planning, and implementing ID projects in the Maldives. Apart from that, the process will help to re-look into the definitions of project success.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

It has been identified that the Maldives' case requires an in-depth investigation into its ID projects since the field of project management is in the infancy stage in the country, in addition to the limited empirical research available on its ID projects (Yamin & Sim, 2016). There is a growing need to understand the phenomena due to the issues reported on ID projects in the Maldives as highlighted in section three. Better knowledge and understanding of ID projects will not only assist ID projects' practitioners to steer the projects in the right direction, but will also inform policy makers on how to better align public policies relating to ID projects. On top of that, the study will contribute to the project management body of knowledge, where researchers have identified a theory-practice gap of the misalignment of the theoretical frameworks of project success and CSFs in the field of ID projects.

The study will be able to capture the views of the society and help resolve the misalignment between theoretical frameworks and practice. Hence, the research is expected to uncover new values for ID projects and provide better understanding and alignment of public policies relating to this type of project. However, there are a few limitations which need to be considered. Firstly, since the study adopts a qualitative methodology, the findings may not be generalized. Since the objective of the study revolves heavily around the context of the study, the results should be considered along with the context of the study. Secondly, it is expected that there may be limitations in obtaining information and documents. For instance, difficulties in obtaining sensitive documents, reluctance by some stakeholders to be interviewed are expected. Finally, it is also likely that it would take a considerable amount of time for data collection, data analysis, and data validation as all data that are to be collected are descriptive in nature.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, it is envisaged that the research has implications for a larger audience in similar developing small island states around the world implementing ID projects. It can be of interest to researchers and practitioners alike. As for researchers in this field, it is recommended that more researchers should join the debate and contribute to fill the gap in the under-researched field of ID project management. This will allow for more contextual perspectives to emerge and allow policy makers to make informed decisions based on empirical research. Consequently, it will have a cyclical effect of research, policy formulation, project design, project implementation, and project evaluation, which is essential to be carried out at regular intervals to successfully implement development projects. As for practitioners, it is recommended that emphasis should be given to empirical evidence to consider novel approaches in policy

formulation and implementing these complex projects and providing necessary feedback to researchers. Close cooperation between researchers and practitioners would bring about a synergized output which cannot be achieved by working individually and in isolation.

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## **DISCLAIMER**

The authors are responsible for the accuracy of their references including facts and figures, citing of sources, and the originality of this paper.

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