

Project Management and International Development: Competencies for International Assignment

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Abstract : Projects are popular vehicles through which international aid is delivered in developing countries. To achieve their objectives, many northern organizations develop projects with local partner organizations in the developing countries through technical assistance projects. International aid and international development projects precisely have long been criticized for poor results although billions are spent every year. Little empirical research in the field of project management has the focus on knowledge transfer in international development context. This paper focuses particularly on personal dimensions of international assignees participating in project within local team members in the host country. We propose to explore the possible links with a human resource management perspective in order to shed light on the less research problematic of knowledge transfer in development cooperation projects. The process leading to capacity building being far complex, involving multiple dimensions and far from being linear, we propose here to assess if traditional research on expatriate in multinational corporations pertain to the field of project management in developing countries. The following question is addressed: in the context of international development project cooperation, what personal determinants should the selection process focus when looking to fill a technical assistance position in a developing country? To answer that question, we first reviewed the literature on expatriate in the context of inter organizational knowledge transfer. Second, we proposed a theoretical framework combining perspectives of development studies and management to explore if parallels can be draw between traditional international assignment and technical assistance project assignment in developing countries. We conducted an exploratory study using case studies from technical assistance initiatives led in Haiti, a country in Central America. Data were collected from multiple sources following qualitative study research methods. Direct observations in the field were allowed by local leaders of six organization; individual interviews with present and past international assignees, individual interview with local team members, and focus groups were organized in order to triangulate information collected. Contrary from empirical research on knowledge transfer in multinational corporations, results tend to show that technical expertise rank well behind many others characteristics. Results tend to show the importance of soft skills, as a prerequisite to succeed in projects where local team have to collaborate. More importantly, international assignees who were talking knowledge sharing instead of knowledge transfer seemed to feel more satisfied at the end of their mandate than the others. Reciprocally, local team members who perceived to have participated in a project with an expat looking to share instead of aiming to transfer knowledge seemed to describe the results of project in more positive terms than the others. Results obtained from this exploratory study open the way for a promising research agenda in the field of project management. It emphasises the urgent need to achieve a better understanding on the complex set of soft skills project managers or project chiefs would benefit to develop, in particular, the ability to absorb knowledge and the willingness to share one's knowledge.

Keywords : international assignee, international project cooperation, knowledge transfer, soft skills

Conference Title : ICAPM 2018 : International Conference on Advanced Project Management

Conference Location : New York, United States

Conference Dates : October 08-09, 2018