

Success conditions for international development capacity building projects



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KEYWORDS

- Capacity building
- International development projects
- Project context
- Success factors
- Success conditions

Article highlight:

This article examines the research question: what are the conditions that enable international development capacity building project success?

What does the paper cover?

The study examines four capacity building projects and highlights the conditions that enable their success. The authors suggest that context and success conditions matter in international development projects.

Methodology:

A two-step research approach was adopted in this **qualitative study**.

A literature review led to a **conceptual framework**. The authors argue that the documented key success factors need to be considered alongside success conditions or circumstances under which projects work.

An **inductive approach** identified new success conditions from the research – these were labelled 'meta-conditions', as opposed to 'framework' or literature-based conditions.

Then a **multiple case study** was undertaken. Four capacity building projects in Ghana, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam were selected, followed by semi-structured interviews with 20 project practitioners involved in their implementation. To triangulate the data, written report documentation was analysed.

Finally, both the framework conditions and the meta-conditions were presented to seven project practitioners in a one-and-a-half-hour **workshop to test the validity and applicability of the success conditions** in practice.

Research findings:

Framework success conditions

The framework conditions demonstrate the combined influences of structural, institutional, and managerial success conditions to enable project success.

The authors also elicited emergent success conditions, which only became apparent during the projects' implementation:

- **Context: shifting boundaries and enabling institutions** – changes in the contextual conditions helped contribute to project success. Also, involvement of enabling organisations, who were not always in the original plan, contributed to success.
- **Beneficiary organisation: leadership, commitment and accountability** – leadership and capacity of the beneficiary organisation was a positive condition. This level of trust was shown to grow gradually.
- **Implementing organisation: expertise, stakeholder coordination and conflict management** – the ability of the implementing organisation to adapt, provide the 'right' expertise, and coordinate stakeholders so that the beneficiaries were fully involved was the strongest success condition.
- **Monitoring and motivation** – project monitoring as a demonstration of progress towards final result and as a tool to motivate beneficiaries and engage with stakeholders was an emergent success condition in project implementation.

Meta-conditions

Further analysis was undertaken to identify new patterns in the data.

- **Multi-stakeholder commitment** – engagement from political, beneficiary, community champions as well as the experts, other stakeholders and project management staff created a depth of resources working towards common results.
- **Collaboration (teamwork)** – it was important to get the right team together; build mutual trust and accountability; make sure the core team was stable; and build good communication mechanisms and safe spaces for feedback.
- **Alignment (compatibility, fit)** – the project theme needs to fit within the environment of the beneficiaries, the implementing organisation, the enabling institutions and the higher level of government: multi-stakeholder planning/design is key. The research identified the value of including local coordinators in the early design stages.

- **Adaptation** – this condition related to the flexibility of project structures to evolve and adjust over time. This supported the need to recruit and train more experienced local project coordinators. It was also identified that successful project adaptability was more about management styles than resources.

In the **validation workshop**, participants found the framework conditions and meta-conditions reflective of practice but acknowledged that some weak results on the framework conditions were likely due to smaller sample size and feasibility.

Conclusions:

The **implications for theory** are as follows.

- Highlighting the importance of success conditions, the research provides more contextual information for success factors and unravels the circumstances under which projects thrive.
- The authors propose that high levels of the new meta-conditions capture the structural, institutional and project management conditions, and also link the success factors with the project context.
- The research supports the idea that there are both initial success conditions (happen in advance of the project) and emergent conditions (occur in the wake of the project).

The **implications for practice** are as follows.

- High levels of multi-stakeholder commitment, collaboration, alignment and adaptation are necessary for projects to succeed. Project managers can use this knowledge to ensure project success.
- The identification of meta-conditions allows a more user-friendly set of success conditions that can be applied to future projects.
- The meta-conditions provide future project managers working on local government development projects with more contextual information on the stakeholders and processes that help spark success.
- Leadership ability and project management skills emerged as strong contributors to project success: increasing training in these areas is key for project beneficiaries.

Significance of the research:

For project managers: This research repositions the focus of performance measurement on the enabling mechanisms for development and less on results. Project managers should understand the circumstances under which their projects work.

For researchers: There is scope for further research: there is limited academic research about the understanding of emerging project success conditions, especially in the international development sector.

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Comments from the authors:

A follow-up survey carried out in May 2017 at the same implementing agency revealed that, while the success conditions are used in practice, the Adaptation meta-condition is still a challenge. The researchers frequently use the conditions to assess local beneficiary organisations' commitment and to temper donor expectations.

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Complete article

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Glossary:

Project success:

In this paper, 'success' means both project management success and deliverable success together. (Short-term success is the delivery of the project on time, within cost and to specific objectives; long-term success is measured by impact, sustainability and relevance for both country and beneficiaries.)

Success conditions:

The necessary states of being, circumstances or pre-requisites that must exist or emerge for project success to occur. These vary for each project.



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