

International Project Management: Could it be another project management specialization that needs consideration?

By Isaac Nyarwaya

I recently started a new job in a regional inter-governmental organization. It is only then that I started to be exposed to the dynamics of transboundary projects; that is, projects that operate in more than one country. As I was thinking about the profession of project management, I started thinking deeply about the concept of international project management. At least I have heard about IT Project Management, Construction Project Management, and so on but I had never heard of International Project Management. Reflecting on the nature of transboundary projects, I thought international project management is an area that needs to be given due importance and consideration going forward.

Dynamics in managing transboundary projects

Let me share with you some the nature and structure of transboundary projects.

Structure:

- The projects may have a Regional Project Coordination Unit with a Regional Project Coordinator (RPC) at the minimum. Some could have a RPC and a staff in charge of Monitoring and Evaluation, An Accountant, a Project Administrator, etc. The number of staff for the Regional Project Coordination Unit will depend on the size of the project and the donor/ partner requirements.
- Each country where the project will be implemented will have a national project implementation unit with its own staff. This national unit will have relatively more staff than the regional unit because activities are going to be implemented here and thus, there is more work at the national level. At the minimum, the national project implementation unit will have a National Project Coordinator but depending on the size of the project could have other key staff such as M&E Officer, Project Accountant, Administration Officer, and so on.
- In relation to broader governance of the projects, the Regional Project Implementation Unit will be under the institution that requested the funds and is charged with overall oversight in the management of the project. This is a similar arrangement at the National Project Implementation Unit. The Unit will be under another institution that is the regarded as the implementation partner.

Challenges:

The challenges involved in the transboundary projects are immense. Let me point out only a few that I have personally seen.

- There are cultural differences that impact the achievement of project objectives.
- Different levels of buy-in and support at the national level. Some countries may be slow to deliver on projects when the idea is to move together to achieve a common goal.
- Etc, etc.

What then is the way forward?

I think the governance of the project management profession globally should appreciate the dynamics of transboundary projects and how they require a blend of project managers that are prepared to manage the challenges involved. We need to prepare project managers to develop insights to face the challenges involved with working in an international setting. This should shape the training and education required for project management. There might be already some work done in this regard, but I think it should be given due consideration. Thus:

- We should be expecting to see project management training and academic programs with a specific specialization in International Project Management. If this is already there, I mean it should be scaled up and popularized just like other specializations.

And this will not be new to the project management profession; we have specializations in other domains that cater for the global perspectives in their domains. Take an example of International Development (which has academic training up to PhD level), International Management, International Law, and so on.

- We should be expecting the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) to be updated to cater for the new or updated blend of skills required in the International Project Management. PMBOK is just an example. But other bodies of knowledge such as PRINCE2 Manual and others should be updated in that regard. Again, if there is coverage of the same, I am only saying that we should see if it has been given enough consideration.
- The immediate above goes with certification. If we appreciate that those managing programs and portfolios should be recognized in a special way when certifying them, then we should also recognize that International Project Management is another segment that could be certified based on an international project management certification.
- In addition, academics should explore the concept of International Project Management and research and write more about it. This is the way, I think the world will start to appreciate it and give it consideration it deserves.

Conclusion

This small piece was intended to open our eyes on the changing and expanding nature of project management and what it means to the profession. I believe it is time to appreciate international project management as an area that needs due attention. It is obvious that we need to build skills and expertise of project management that will enable a Project Manager to manage a project in any part of the world and more so important manage a project that operates in more than one country. As the world continues to forge partnerships in terms of establishing Regional Economic Bodies, it is inevitable to see many more transboundary and multinational projects coming up. We will need project managers to adjust to this changing environment and there is no better time than now to prepare project managers in that direction.

About the Author



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Isaac Nyarwaya is a development and project management practitioner with 16 years of experience. He has worked in leading international NGOs, United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), including holding senior management positions in Rwanda's public service. He currently works as Principal Resource Mobilization Officer at the Lake Victoria Basin Commission; an institution affiliated to East African Community. He holds a Bachelor's Degree in Management with Distinction from the National University of Rwanda and a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) in Project Management from the Maastricht School of Management. He holds a foundational PRINCE2 Certification. He has been a member of the Project Management Institute (PMI) since 1997 and a member of PMI- Kenya Chapter. As an International Correspondent for PM World, Isaac will be reporting news and information about projects and project management in Rwanda and will be making commentaries on project management based on his exposure on projects in the East African Region. Isaac Nyarwaya can be contacted at inyarwaya@gmail.com or Tel. +254 740173053