The titanic sunk, so what? On functional management control of development assistance projects: practical observations for improved outcomes

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ABSTRACT
Significant as they are to activating development and addressing some of the most difficult and entrenched problems in developing economies, development assistance projects operate under challenging and rather erratic conditions. Consequently, majority of the challenges and problems that confront them are difficult to anticipate and solve a priori and must be engaged dynamically as and when they arise. Today, with a momentous blend of volatilities, uncertainties, complexities and ambiguities characterizing the environment of developing economies to hasten profound managerial challenges, functional management control, which is critical to identifying and addressing problems and deviations to enable improved performance outcomes, has eluded development assistance projects. This has modeled poor management control into one of its greatest threats to implementation. Grounded in experience from development practice, this position paper moots that poor management control aid double whammys of today’s development assistance projects. Further, it reflects why bureaucracies, understaffing, weak supervision and cultural insensitivity in the conduct of such projects are responsible for this threat and discusses how it could be contained for improved performance outcomes. It concludes with highlights on implications for research and practice.

1. Introduction
Today, the environments of developing economies are characterized by a momentous blend of volatilities, uncertainties, complexities and ambiguities (VUCA), which hastens profound managerial challenges, especially in conducting projects. Project teams of development assistance projects therefore face unprecedented changes and challenges in the management and implementation of such project endeavors.
Development assistance projects thus lag behind other project types in their ability to effectively control their activities for improved outcomes. One only has to do a cursory review of project reports to come across numerous examples of such projects in development contexts that have been ineffectual and have failed to meet their objectives to generate their intended outcomes, for example, the Abyei Development Project in Sudan whose implementation was recommended not to be extended beyond its scheduled termination in June 1981 after its achievements were found to fall seriously short of the objectives expressed in the original and amended project documents following an evaluation, which was commissioned by its donors (see Barclay et al. 1981) and the Kpong Irrigation Project in Ghana, which was terminated in 2004 by its donors after a schedule overrun of more than 90 months.

In as much as any project endeavor is considered a complex system (Williams 1999; Whitty and Maylor 2009; Williams 2017), present-day VUCA makes managerial threats much sharper, rendering development assistance projects even more difficult to manage. The term “complex,” as used here, refers to any system formed out of many components whose behavior is emergent (Whitty and Maylor 2009). Such threats force project management units (PMUs) to wrestle with how to effectively control project activities to improve performance, thereby facilitating achievement of set objectives and targets to, in turn, generate intended outcomes. Consequently, management control strategies capable of ensuring improved outcomes have been beyond the reach of projects in development contexts for a long time, thereby modeling poor management control into one threat that continues to consume contemporary projects in development contexts and facilitate double whammies.

Indeed, the threats to the conduct of development assistance projects are manifold and range from overambitious and technically deficient designs, inappropriate or ineffective appraisals, long lead-times, political expediency, faulty planning, managerial passivity and subterfuge, lack of adequate local project management capacities, incompatible host and donor management systems and endemic corruption (for example, Strachan 1978; Rondinelli 1979; Nguyen 2007; Agheneza 2009; Ika 2012). Besides, Rondinelli (1979) has long posited that all development assistance projects appear experimental in their unique environments such that even seemingly routine replications often meet unanticipated difficulties when transferred from one cultural setting to another. It does not therefore stretch the boundaries of credibility for each development assistance project to have its own set of threats. Yet, in an age of a momentous blend of VUCA in the environments of developing assistance projects with its concomitant challenges, poor management control is cardinal among the threats to effectively conducting development assistance projects due to (1) the basics of interaction between donors and host governments, which makes the application of good project management practices difficult (Youker 1999), (2) the rather close knit (inherent interconnectivity) among tasks where the outcome of one task has a marked effect on others and influences the conduct of successive tasks and (3) substantial heterogeneity in the large numbers of stakeholder involvement (Youker 2003; Ahsan and Gunawan 2010; Ika 2012) who push different agenda to present further managerial challenges. Moreover, to paraphrase Siffin (1979), unlike a train trip to a ticketed destination, conducting a development...
assistance project is more like navigating a ship from an unfavorable climate towards a much better and more favorable one.

The threat of poor management control is intriguing and has been observed across various sectors in the development assistance terrain, attracting considerable attention to the wider development community on how to keep it at bay. For example, Youker (1999) asserted that “poor feedback and control mechanisms for early detection of problems” is one recurring problem in managing (international) projects in development contexts following a glean of ex-post facto project evaluation reports of the World Bank Group. And more recently, a research study of over 50 development assistance project operations of the African Development Bank (AfDB) Group sampled from Ghana and Mali, highlighted poor project management control mechanisms as one prominent reason, which underlie ineffectuality and eventual failure of (international) project operations in development contexts (see Boakye 2015). These findings perhaps explain why Strachan (1978) long propounded that the recurring problems in the administration of development assistance projects could be traced back to the rational paradigm guiding the evolution of the aid control system. Therein lies an important lesson for all development assistance projects: the need for potent management control strategies and systems is indispensable to functional delivery and improved outcomes.

Age-old research (for example, Rondinelli 1979; Gow and Morss 1988) highlights that the problems of planning and managing development assistance projects are not all equally amenable to change, sometimes virtually intractable and occur frequently enough to consistently impede progress of implementation. Accordingly, in as much as any managerial effort is as good as the control mechanism(s) it adopts, we cannot hope the threat of poor management control away effortlessly due to the apparent experimental nature of development assistance projects (see Rondinelli 1979). Consequently, with the power of human ingenuity to meet and solve problems, it would take effort and courage, and in a world of constant change, would require a rather versatile relentless collaborative rethinking of procedures and routines in project management to facilitate adaptation of our approaches to managing development assistance projects.

This paper, grounded in practical experience in development practice, reflects on four common causes of the threat of poor management control to present two approaches that can help us conduct projects in development contexts better to, in turn, facilitate improved outcomes. Such insights (1) would allow promoters, advocates and managers of development assistance projects to know where to concentrate efforts to effectively address the threat and (2) could also serve as a useful premise in the search for a common tone to functional management control strategies and systems to help engage unforeseen problems and challenges better as and when they arise to, in turn, facilitate sound implementation for improved outcomes in development assistance projects.

In addition, identifying and addressing the causes of the threat of poor management control, even with temporary fixes, could help build momentum toward deeper long-term improvements to advance future-proofing of successive projects efforts. Accordingly, one theoretical implication of this position paper, in paraphrasing Tannenbaum (1956), lies in its potential to contribute to the formulation of further
research through which further refinement and understanding of the threat could be achieved. Capitalizing on such refinements, policy makers, institutions and professionals in the (international) development domain would have an ameliorated understanding of the threat and thus be put in a better position to identify strategies to effectively engage and navigate the threat in conducting projects in development contexts.

Below, the paper openly presents observations and ideas on the threat and how to engage it to facilitate effective delivery of development assistance projects for improved outcomes.

2. Causes and consequences of the threat

Governments have a history of bureaucratic torpor, a pattern that has gradually crept into the conduct of development assistance projects, probably because (1) most project staff, more often than not, are recruited or seconded from the government sector and (2) of the tendency to overstaff projects through, for example, cronyism to facilitate subterfuge on the part of greedy officials, which sometimes results in micromanagement with many layers of oversight. “Bureaucracy” used herein refers to excessive unnecessary complicated administrative procedures in project implementation.

Modern-day development assistance projects, which face unprecedented profound managerial challenges due to a momentous blend of VUCA characterizing the environment of developing economies cannot be delivered effectively with time-wasting bureaucracies. This goes to show that contemporary projects in development contexts cannot thrive with a reliance on bureaucratic principles. Yet, although technological change is outpacing bureaucracies, bureaucracies of all forms and shapes still abound in the management control of time-bound development assistance projects. The colossi of such bureaucracies are the rather long (1) lead-times for programs and projects, and (2) waiting times we observe today for approval of reports and recommendations necessary to, for example, engage resource persons to undertake specialized project and procurement activities. These, in turn, lead to (1) ineffectual projects owing to non-completion of all required activities identified beforehand as critical to achieving project goals and/or making the desired impact and (2) termination of projects. The aftermath is the littering of the (international) development assistance domain with many examples of high profile projects that have comprehensively failed to meet expectations, resulting in disappointments in the stakeholder–beneficiary dyad and creating an apparent penchant for failure of development assistance projects (see, for example, Ika 2012; Hermano et al. 2013).

Another cause of poor management control is project understaffing. Project coordination units (PCUs) tend to be understaffed some of the times. For example, there was an instance where an existing PMU handling a project was tasked with the administration of an incoming project, resulting in extra and multiple workloads on the sleeves of the project team (see endnote 6). When the first project finally folded up, the on-going new project was left understaffed without key personnel such as a monitoring and evaluation for adaptability and learning (MEAL) officer since some staff of the
folded-up project had to leave following expiration of their contracts. This created further managerial challenges for the on-going project.

An apparent inadequate institutional and professional expertise in project management competencies in developing economies (Nguyen 2007), despite years of collective and individual experience in managing such projects is perhaps largely accountable for understaffing. But this should not be too much of a surprise. This is because even when requisite personnel are available to steer the affairs of a project, projects sometimes run with part-time or fewer people than required until it gets into trouble, then somehow, the required people become available to the project to get it back on track (O’Connor and Reinsborough 1992).

A project monitoring and supervision mission is only as good and effective as the skill-mix of the team for the mission. Yet, for example, MEAL in development assistance projects is sometimes left in the hands of a single officer instead of it been a relentless, collaborative effort with the entire project team on board. At other times, (senior) management sits down in offices without going to the field to acquaint themselves with progress of works and wait for progress reports and updates on project activities from contractors, consultants, project partners, etc. some of whom manipulate such reports to their advantage (see endnote 6). Such actions do not bode well for timely identification and addressing of deviations and teething problems to facilitate effective implementation and performance outcomes, modeling weak supervision into yet another cause of poor management control of development assistance projects.

There is utility in monitoring and supervision missions to overall project implementation and outcomes (see, for example, O’Connor and Reinsborough 1992) as well as to project reviews, which for example, facilitates learning to enable future-proofing of projects. Nonetheless, monitoring and supervision of on-going project activities needful to identify and address teething problems and deviations from standards or adapt approaches to project implementation are sometimes ignored or put off to later dates. When time finally runs out in such cases, poor skill-mixed teams are hurriedly put up to undertake monitoring and supervision without adequate attention whatsoever to the project activities to be monitored and the need for personnel skilled or with expertise in those tasks. In such cases, they are undertaken for reporting purposes in which case the focus shifts from delivering value to satisfying the stipulated number of monitoring and supervision missions earmarked to be undertaken in the project design, a problem I refer to as the management-for-accountability trap. This trap results in loss of quality time and other resources to needless, limited, short duration ineffectual monitoring and supervision missions that do not impact the project positively in any way and do not augur well for needful project review.

Then, there is the problem of cultural insensitivity in which case there is no consideration of the culture and local conditions in the development and conduct of development assistance projects (see, for example, Ika 2012). Good intentions can backfire and eventually fail if development assistance projects are not well-suited to local conditions. Moreover, the art of project design is to incorporate into the project a combination of existing and new “traits” suitable to the particular setting and the particular project (Rotner 1970). Yet, there is usually an excessive reliance on foreign technology, disregard of local conditions and direct transplant of foreign processes and systems into
essentially incompatible local environments although (1) all development projects are somewhat experimental such that even seemingly routine replications often meet unanticipated difficulties when transferred from one cultural setting to another (Rondinelli 1979) and (2) culture triumphs over systems. The strength of an institution’s culture is associated with success and is, at least, as important as any other success factor (Denrell 2005).

Where such incompatible processes and systems depend heavily on monitoring, evaluating and correcting in an explicit manner, it is likely to offend people’s sense of autonomy and self-control, necessitating the need for a rather close and strict supervision (see Ouchi 1979). Moreover, development assistance projects under such conditions might be suspected to be subservient to foreign subjugation, resulting in a lack of the requisite support and backing they need, especially from stakeholders, to realize their objectives. Therein lie the consequences of poor project ownership - stakeholder alienation from the project and an unenthusiastic, purely compliant project staff without any interest whatsoever in the project - and managerial passivity. These aggravate poor project delivery and are likely to result in ineffectual unsustainable development outcomes. Yet another repercussion is the lack of development of local capacity in managing projects as expressed by, for example, Nguyen (2007).

3. How to address the threat to do management control better

In as much as we cannot hope the threat of poor management control of projects in development contexts away effortlessly, much could be done to help do functional management control of such project endeavors. One fundamental yet often overlooked way to achieve this is to create room for project teams to, with the help of situated learning, experimentation and interaction, “act out” unforeseen problems and challenges to management that cannot be fully avoided ex ante as and when they arise through specific circumstances of projects (Ika 2012; Scott-Smith 2014; Maclay 2015).

Thus, development assistance projects that seek to overcome the threat of poor management control can do so with holistic strategies that enable dynamism, adaptability and responsiveness towards unanticipated issues during implementation. This can be achieved with two approaches: allowing a degree of flexibility in project implementation and balancing control techniques. After all, flexibility is a primary approach to improve effectiveness of projects (Shahu, Pundir, and Ganapathy 2012), which ties in well with the aim of management control – to ensure effective outcomes. And the combined effect of both the blend of control techniques and interactions arising from blended (balanced) control techniques contribute to determining outcomes to a much higher degree than the application of just a single control technique (Long, Burton, and Cardinal 2002).

3.1. Allow a degree of flexibility in project implementation

Uncertainty is the rule rather than an exception in projects but particularly so in development assistance projects. Such projects involve diverse heterogeneous stakeholders, target some of the world’s most difficult and entrenched problems and are implemented under changing and somewhat unpredictable conditions (Youker 2003; Ahsan
and Gunawan 2010; Ika 2012). Given these in an era where a momentous blend of VUCA characterizes the environment within which development assistance projects are conducted to hasten profound managerial challenges, one sure way to deal with pitfalls that impede progress of implementation to facilitate functional management to, in turn, enable improved outcomes is to allow a degree of flexibility during implementation to allow project teams to be dynamic, adaptive and responsive to risks. Flexibility describes the ability of a project to cope with changes in the project definition or scope and compensate them with little influences on schedule (time), costs and quality through appropriate management policies and actions, making it the factor that keeps projects on track in relation to the success factors of cost, quality and time (Shahu, Pundir, and Ganapathy 2012).

Age-old research (see, for example, Strachan 1978) postulates that any system that promotes detailed planning years in advance, by people who are neither going to be responsible for implementation nor even likely to be involved in the implementation, is almost surely going to be ineffectual since long-term written plans and projections quickly lose their accuracy due to their inability to anticipate the future in the degree of detail necessary. Besides, it is argued that such blue-print plans leaves too little a room for project teams to be dynamic, adaptive and responsive towards unforeseen occurrences (Maclay 2015). Moreover, there is no guarantee whatsoever that all planned project activities would be executed to the latter in the conduct of a development assistance project. This is because on one hand conducting a development assistance project is akin to navigating a ship to its destination from an unfavorable climate toward a much better and more favorable one (Siffin 1979) and on the other hand, a project plan is generally supposed to be a means to an end but not an end in itself. Hence, it is advantageous for project teams to have a “room to maneuver”, so as to be able to adjust plans as and when more knowledge is gained about project needs and challenges within specific contexts (Midler 1995).

Although controversies surround the application of flexibility in project management (see, for example, Miller and Lessard 2000; Olsson 2006), some development assistance projects have avoided disasters in implementation by adhering to a flexible approach to conduct. For example, thanks to a decision not to build a new regional office for an institute for small-scale fisheries development in Mozambique on the land originally earmarked for its construction owing to protracted land disputes, the Artisanal Fisheries Development Project was able to avoid a disastrous cost overrun of almost 900%; the cost of construction, estimated at UA80,000.00 at appraisal, rose to UA710,000.00 due to the protracted land dispute. This perhaps explains and contributes to why the AfDB Group, having identified inflexible and cumbersome procedures as major sources of implementation delays in their project operations, recommends flexibility as essential to ensuring quality and sustainable project outcomes, especially for project operations in its agricultural water management portfolio.

3.2. Balance control techniques

Beyond allowing a “room to maneuver” in implementation, development assistance projects must endeavor to balance control techniques for effective delivery. Project
teams of such projects could choose to direct management control efforts at either solely using (1) output control, for example, setting and verifying project targets; (2) input control, for example, selection and training of personnel when there is inadequate knowledge on both the transformation process and ability to measure outputs; or (3) behavior control, for example, specifying detailed procedures of how tasks should be undertaken when there is adequate knowledge on both the transformation process and ability to measure outputs (see Liu et al. 2010). Doing these do not stretch the boundaries of sensibility in project implementation.

However, as the case of managing civil works in the Inland Valleys Rice Development Project (IVRDP) demonstrates, there is utility in balancing control techniques (Long, Burton and Cardinal 2002). IVRDP could not complete its entire spectrum of civil works before the donors closed the project, yet it was able to significantly improve performance in the delivery of its civil works, thereby generating useful lessons for future-proofing of subsequent projects. This it did by organizing a pre-bid workshop with all potential bidders to provide them with an overview of the works they would be executing (input control); organizing extensive site possessions programs for selected contractors with beneficiaries and stakeholders (input control); undertaking frequent monitoring and supervision missions—which involved all technical leads of IVRDP as well as specialists and resource persons from implementing partners and other stakeholders—to project sites to monitor progress of works to correct deviations and advise personnel on how to solve or moderate teething challenges (output control); and organizing joint frequent review meetings with all contractors and their consultants with representation from project financiers sometimes to define and review procedures (behavior control). Such review meetings, which usually followed a complete round of monitoring and supervision missions also deliberated the way forward. These control techniques were applied in addition to putting together comprehensive bidding documents with engineering drawings of deliverables, delivery schedules, list of personnel required for the works, etc. that were put together after initial surveys.

“Management control is most effective when the formal and informal techniques are skillfully blended” (attributed to R.N. Anthony, see: Moores and Mula 2000, pg. 94). The inclusive site possessions programs by IVRDP enabled the contractors and consultants to familiarize themselves with the local beneficiaries and get accustomed to local settings so that cultural considerations could be factored into the modus operandi of the contractors. Although such site possession programs could be seen as satisfying a required component of contract administration, by making it collaborative enough to involve local beneficiaries and stakeholders, IVRDP was actually setting the tone for (1) a balanced control of contract execution through a combination of formal techniques on its part and informal techniques on the part of local beneficiaries and their communities through provision of useful localized advice for contractors and (2) incorporating cultural perspectives into controlling the contract execution process. This is rightly so since input control emerged from clan control, which is based on traditions to cater for local existing conditions (Ouchi 1980).

But for such balanced control techniques, IVRDP would have been a high-profile disaster as the intervention it sought to introduce was quite relatively new in Ghana,
the contractors did not have adequate experience in undertaking such interventions and unforeseen weather conditions (extensive period of rainfall) became very unfavorable for the execution of the civil works. The IVRDP case thus shows that the concept of balancing control techniques – that the application of multiple control modes outperforms that of a single control mode – as theorized by Long, Burton and Cardinal (2002), is even more relevant and critical to do management control better.

Moreover, research highlights that each control technique has its own strengths and weaknesses. For example, whilst input control enhances innovation (Cardinal 2001), behavior and output controls are best for organizations in relatively stable industries (Ouchi 1979). And output control is less flexible and less adaptable to particular needs although it conserves organizational resources better than behavior control (Ouchi 1977). The lesson here is this: relying solely on a single management control technique is not enough for functional delivery and improved outcomes in projects in development contexts.

4. Conclusion

Improving outcomes of development assistance projects is of prime concern to theory and practice alike. Every development assistance project seeking to remedy challenges to development, and/or activate sectorial and national development, while appearing experimental in different settings, does so under turbulent conditions with finite resources and limited time. Majority of the challenges and problems that confront them during implementation are therefore difficult to anticipate and solve a priori, and must thus be engaged dynamically as and when they become apparent. Consequently, many development assistance projects unfold in unintended ways and thereby struggle to generate improved (intended) outcomes (Easterly 2006; Ika 2012). Accordingly, in an era of momentous VUCA, which characterizes the environment of developing economies to hasten profound managerial challenges, safe thinking and routines would ultimately let us down in efforts to do management control better to, in turn, facilitate improved outcomes. Traditional rigid and bureaucratic approaches, and complete reliance on single control techniques are also no longer enough either. It is thus imperative, in this world of constant change, to tap into the power of human ingenuity to meeting and solving problems to adapt managerial strategies to better engage challenges and problems in the implementation landscape.

This paper, drawing on experience in development practice, has attempted to provide insights into management control of development assistance projects. Much of what is presented herein has been explorative and has focused on what causes poor management control and how to attain consistent functional management control for improved outcomes in such project endeavors. Identifying and addressing these causes, even with temporary fixes, could help generate useful lessons pivotal to setting priorities right and making effective decisions to better engage managerial challenges in present-day and future development assistance projects alike. This is important for understanding and navigating the landscape of implementation of development assistance projects to enable improved outcomes. It would aid promoters, advocates and
managers of such projects to know where to concentrate efforts to effectively address the threat of poor management control. Such insights could also aid policymakers, multilateral and unilateral development institutions, voluntary organizations and development practitioners to advance efforts at future-proofing successive projects, thereby helping build momentum towards deeper long-term improvements.

Additionally, useful exploratory work is about relying on theory-free observations to discover important observations for later theoretical explanations through further research (Antonakis 2017). Moreover, an advantage of programmatic research is its ability to pursue important problems through a series of related projects where the results of one study, and particularly the questions it raises, contribute to the formulation of further research through which greater refinement and understanding can be achieved (Tannenbaum 1956). Thus, insights from this paper could also serve as a useful premise in the search for a common tone to functional management control of development assistance projects, which could help engage unforeseen problems and challenges as and when they arise to facilitate sound implementation for improved outcomes.

It is hoped that beyond helping to do management control better in development assistance projects, this paper generates new stimulating and interesting research ideas in project management for development, which is fundamental for an incremental accumulation of knowledge to enrich and advance the international development body of knowledge.

Notes

1. Development assistance projects, as used in this paper, refers to those external donor financed projects mandated with concentrating resources and expertise to stimulate sectorial and national development in developing economies, for example, to propel infrastructure development and industrialization and improve quality of life by reducing poverty and inequality through, for example, human capability building and institutional interventions.

2. Outcomes as used in this paper refers to extent of project performance and achievements, i.e. realization of goals and objectives.

3. Note that “projects in development contexts” and “development assistance projects” are used interchangeably.

4. Ghana: Kpong Irrigation Project. Completion Report. AfDB (2005); https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Project-and-Operations/ADF-BD-IF-2005-250-EN-GHANA-PCR-KPONG-IRRIGATION.PDF

5. By lead-time, the paper is referring to the length of time taken to start project implementation following identification and development.

6. Author’s personal observation from development practice.

7. Note that PCUs and PMUs are used interchangeably to refer to offices set up to oversee the coordination, management and implementation of development assistance projects.

8. It is worth noting here that understaffing could facilitate weak supervision as monitoring and supervisions missions are sometimes put off due to staffing constraints.

9. Mozambique: Artisanal Fisheries Development Project. Project Completion Report. AfDB (n. d.); https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/document/mozambique-artisanal-fisheries-development-project-project-completion-report-pcr-29887/
10. Unit of Account (UA) is the official currency for activities of the AfDB Group, equivalent to the Special Drawing Right (SDR), the reporting currency of the International Monetary Fund.

11. Agricultural Water Management: An Evaluation of the African Development Bank’s Assistance in Ghana and Mali, 1990–2010. AfDB (2011); https://www.oecd.org/derec/afdb/6_Evaluation_Agricultural%20Water%20Management_Ghana_Mali.pdf

12. Inland Valleys Rice Development Project is an erstwhile project operation of the AfDB Group in Ghana, which sought to increase incomes of smallholder rice producers - both men and women - as well as traders and processors in the country by increasing the production of good quality local rice, thereby contributing to achieving overall sector goals of enhanced food security and reduced rice imports.

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