Why International Development Projects Fail in Africa and What We Can Do Differently

By Olusola Owonikoko
Olusola Samuel Owonikoko drives social inclusion through technology. He leads the team at Stanforte Edge, where he is scaling Project Enable Africa; and incubating Lafiami.com He works at the intersection of development, business, and inclusion. He has over 10 years of experience in building organisations, designing and implementing social impact programs and products targeted at promoting development outcomes for underserved populations; and has worked with several notable brands in the private, public, and civil society sectors, including Access Bank, Google.org, Foreign Missions to Nigeria, WB/IFC, AJWS, USAID, DFID Sightsavers & many others. Read more

Editorial Team
Jimm Chick Fomunjong - Head, Knowledge Management Unit, WACSI
Nancy Kankam Kusi - Programme Officer, Knowledge Management Unit, WACSI

About WACSI
The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) was created by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) to reinforce the institutional and operational capacities of civil society in the region. WACSI also serves as a resource centre for training, research and documentation, experience sharing and political dialogue for CSOs in West Africa.

About WACSeries
WACSeries are analytical periodic write-ups on topical themes and issues relevant to West Africa. These write-ups provide experts, researchers and practitioners a space to reflect, analyse and posit views and recommendations on emerging issues and debates. The WACSeries Op-Eds are thought provoking and intellectually engaging write-ups that provide critical reflections and analysis of issues relevant to civil society and development in West Africa.

Objectives of WACSeries
• To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
• To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
• To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
• To provide recommendations to policy makers.
Why International Development Projects Fail in Africa and What We Can Do Differently

© WACSI 2021

All rights reserved. No part of this report may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the Institute except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. The Institute requests the use of information in this report be registered with them for impact assessment purposes.

Disclaimer:
WACSI accepts no responsibility for suitability of any materials submitted by the contributor of this publication. WACSI assumes no responsibility or liability for errors or inaccuracies. The contributor accept all responsibility for opinions expressed. Use of this research report constitutes acceptance and understanding of these disclaimers.

For more information, write to:
West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) No. 9 Bamboo Street, East Legon P.O. Box AT 1956, Achimota Accra, Ghana
Email: research@wacsi.org Tel: +233 (0) 302 550 224

Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa is a graveyard of numerous development projects.

In almost every rural community in the region, there are legacies of botched attempts at “bettering the lives” of the locals—shattered toilets, empty wells and dilapidated school buildings.

While some of these projects failed structurally, others failed functionally. An example was a library stocked with English-language books in a community where no one spoke or understood the language. Or computer rooms filled with new computers that are securely locked with “no-entry” signs while teachers draw a Microsoft Word interface on blackboards.

The road to hell, they say, is paved with good intentions. Several donors and well-intentioned organisations have conducted projects in Africa that not only failed but left the locals worse than they met them.

The World Bank, the world’s powerhouse of development projects, is not left out.

In 2007, the bank’s private arm, the International Finance Corporation, discovered that only half of its Africa projects succeeded. The reasons are from binary. While African aid projects face unique challenges from their global counterparts, there are noticeable patterns we can avoid.

Three reasons development projects fail in Africa

1. One-Size-Fits-All Models

A 2012 study by Lavagnon A. Ika, a researcher at the University of Ottawa, Canada, revealed that most international development projects experience the same challenge because the project management methods used are inflexible.

According to the study, standard procedures—such as those in World Bank projects—do not regard the size and objectives of the project. As such, project managers lack the flexibility to tailor their methods according to unique local contexts.

Most charity funds run models that prioritise accountability and visibility. They ensure this through gate reviews, financial management and laborious planning using tools such as Seavus Project Viewer. Helpful as it is, it can stifle the social and cultural dimensions of project success.

The was true for the $22 million Lake Turkana fish processing plant in Kenya; funded by the Norwegian government.

Designed in 1971, the project was expected to provide jobs for the Turkana people through fishing and fish processing for export.

However, the Turkana people, like other Nilotic tribes
in the Horn of Africa, are semi-nomadic pastoralists. They feed on milk, blood and meat. Turkana locals who fish commercially are considered poor because they have no cattle. Therefore, fishing was considered a derogatory vocation, sort of.

The Turkana plant was completed and functioned for only a few days. It did not last longer than that. Besides, the cost of operating the freezers and the demand for clean water in the desert were too high to maintain.

The Turkana project remains a white elephant in Kenya’s waterless northwest today.

A saying goes, “No two projects are the same”. This is so true for Africa. No two Africa-based projects are the same, even if they sit in the same communities.

Africa is pot of socio-cultural, political and economic factors that would cripple any project model that refuses to adapt. International development bodies must choose flexibility over tradition; outcomes over processes.

Project management software packages cannot capture the nuances, politics and rival interests that influence real-life project decisions.

What we can do? The way forward is to embrace hybrid models that provide context-specific solutions. Project success in Africa is highly dependent on flexibility and strategic stakeholder engagement. International donors must be comfortable with sacrificing some part of their cherished processes for greater responsiveness.

2. Political Interference

Africa’s political climate is largely young and still evolving. This means it can be crude and cutthroat. Consequently, it is often difficult to separate development projects from the unpredictable nature of African party politics. A classic example is the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline to the Atlantic Ocean.

Completed in 2003, the World Bank costs $4.2 billion. It was termed the biggest development project in Africa.

The World Bank had funded the project on the condition that the proceeds be disbursed with international supervision to develop Chad.

Two years later, however, it all fell like a pack of cards when the then President, Idris Deby, announced that oil money would be diverted to buy weapons or else oil companies would be kicked out of the country.

Until his death in early 2021, Deby’s government spent oil money on regime survival and election rigging as thousands of Chadians wallowed in penury.

What we can do? Political bias has stifled Africa’s infrastructure development for decades. As much as international donors hope to better Africa, they cannot succeed without the cooperation of indigenous governments. To address this impasse, there is a need to foster communication between international donor and governments, beyond party politics. More importantly, they must woo the organised private sector who will better fight for their cause when the government goes rogue. Together with the organised private sector, they can create structures and systems that will immunise long-term development projects from volatile political cycles.

3. Lack of Buy-in from locals

Photo from wallpaper flare
Many local and international donors adopt models that inadvertently sidelines the very people they are trying to help. These models glorify rushing into localities with charity funds to deliver projects purely managed by outsiders.

Therefore, the locals feel disconnected from the project from get-go. Such disconnectedness means that the project team is less likely to capture the nuanced needs and expectations of the locals into their decision-making process. This was the case with a water project by PlayPumps international.

Perhaps the most pressing challenges facing Africa in the early 2000s—and today—is lack of clean water. PlayPumps sought to change that.

The idea was to situate a merry-go-round in an African village and tether it to an overhead water tank a few metres away.

As children play on the merry-go-round, the kinetic energy generated pumps underground water, filling the tank. This way, children not only have enough space to play, they and their parents will have drinking water.

Not just that, the overhead tank, seven metres high, would host HIV/AIDS prevention campaign billboards on two sides and the rest two sides for advertising. Brilliant idea!

PlayPump received the World Bank Development Marketplace Award in 2000. In 2006, the Bush administration announced $10 million in support.

The initial goal was to install pumps in 4,000 villages across Africa, to serve 10 million people. What followed was an aggressive installation of pumps such that, in some villages, the locals were not even consulted.

In Mozambique, for instance, some locals complained that a PlayPump substituted their community’s traditional water-drawing gear without their approval.

The repercussions of this neglect were severe.

A 2009 investigative report in The Guardian revealed that many PlayPumps were lying fallow. Children were not playing on them and the tanks were empty. In hindsight, the goal itself seems outlandish.

For one, most villagers require water in the early hours. The planners never realised how improbable it was to get children to play at a merry-go-round at that time of the day.

Consequently, users were forced to rotate the merry-go-rounds by themselves; a grueling exercise for the elderly. These challenges were unforeseen partly because PlayPump ignored the inputs of host communities. More so, the model became too difficult to maintain and was reliant on child labour.

After several complaints by Mozambicans about non-functioning units, PlayPumps International pacified them with their traditional hand-pumps, reversing everything to square one.

What we can do? Cultural issues are real. Without buy-in from locals, the most brilliant and well-meaning projects will buckle and break. International development organisations have a duty to engage stakeholders at every level, especially the ordinary people. It helps to engage government, the organised private sector and civil society organisations. But if we neglect the perspective of the ordinary people, we run the risk of a PlayPump replay.
As players in the development sphere, it is our duty to identify our stakeholders, categorise them according to their levels of influence and interest on the project, listen to their expectations from us and from the project, and involve them from the very start. Not as an afterthought.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the challenges of development projects in Africa are numerous—corruption, political interference, rigid models that disregard diversity and lack of buy-in from locals. It is hard to find projects that are 100% successful. But then, how do we define success in international development projects? In my opinion, a project is only successful when everyone involved—donors, implementers, host communities and recipients—agree that the project has succeeded.