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Project Management in Africa: Failed States, Terrorism and Bad Governance

When any type of problem, from poverty to disease, from corruption to ethnic cleansing, from unemployment to environmental disasters, is mentioned, the name “Africa” is used as a worst case scenario. Some people even employ the name “Africa” as if it is one country, pushing the reality that it is a continent comprising of 53 sovereign nations aside. Nonetheless, they are correct, in some sense, in that most of the nations of the continent are extremely poor, devastated by unjustifiable wars, ravaged by corruption and lack of good governance, failing to meet basic needs for their citizens, and governed by authoritarian dictators.



Pictures of Africa: Poverty, Wars and Authoritarian Dictators

In the same token, Africa lags well behind the other continents in adopting new production technologies, using information and communication technology to facilitate business, attracting foreign direct investment, facilitating research and development in different industrial areas, protecting intellectual property rights, and implementing international professional standards including project management. The region is also underserved by international professional societies like PMI, which has only two chapters, in South Africa and Egypt, for a population of around 1 billion.

Yet, the variability amongst the countries of the continent in these dimensions is also wide enough to make it difficult to talk about it in general terms. According to internetworldstats.com, the internet penetration as percent of total population in Africa was only 6.7% in the second quarter of 2009, while the world average was 24.7%. Meanwhile, Egypt was the leading African nation having 12.6 million internet users closely followed by Nigeria and Morocco with 11 and 10.3 million users respectively. Zimbabwe was the having the lowest numbers with only 1.4 million users. In another measurement, rate of corruption, there is no African country among the top 30 least corrupt countries of the world. Botswana, the most corruption free country of Africa, is ranked at 32nd place with a corruption cleanness index of 5.9 out of 10 (10 being highly clean and 0 being highly corrupt). Ethiopia is placed at 138th place with 2.2 and Chad being the most corrupt nation of the planet with 1.7 (nationmaster.com).

Provided that, the region is the “hotspot” of horrific things in the world - frequent wars, violations of human rights, terrorism, lack of justice and absence of good governance are common scenes. Somalia and Darfur have remained political disasters of the world; the latter grows more chaotic with each day to the extent that the world worries that it might turn out to be a “safe haven” for terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda. There are also many active conflicts in Angola, Algeria,

Burundi, Congo, Cote d-ivoire, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sudan and Somalia; millions are being killed and displaced. Yet, the ignorance of the rest of the world to these dire problems has continued. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, an Egyptian diplomat and former secretary-general of the United Nations, has recently opined that “there is still this kind of basic discrimination against the African People and the African Problems”.

That being the case, however, what could Project Management do in addressing these problems of the poor continent? What type of projects are being undertaken (and will be undertaken) to help solve these problems? What can professional societies like PMI and IPMA do in the effort to solve these problems? I need your company in going through the difficult journey of reacting to these queries. Let us try, then!

The status Quo

Partly by force and partly by choice, many African governments are executing economic and social infrastructure projects, which will help to decrease the rampant poverty in the continent. Most of the problems of the continent are rooted in the poor living conditions of the people, some of whom have preferred terrorism as legitimate instrument for fulfilling their life aspirations. As Marcus Aurelius was once quoted as saying “Poverty is the mother of Crime”.

Hence, improving the living conditions of African people seems to be the first main step for redressing the above mentioned problems. To this end, sectors which could create jobs and income as immediate benefits, while generating a multiplier effect for sustainable development like roads, power, irrigation, telecommunication, schools, health centers, airports, ship ports, mining and agricultural projects have been the focal points of many African countries. The backlog of demand in these sectors has supported the viability of the projects, and attracted huge investment from China.

As numbers are more explanatory than words, let us have a look at the demand backlog of the continent. According to food4africa.org, 315 million people of Sub-Saharan Africa population live under a dollar a day while 184 million people suffer from malnutrition. The size of African population that has access to hospital and doctors is less than 50%. The average life expectancy in Africa is only 41 years. In this impoverished continent, one in six children die before the age of five, twenty five times higher than the OECD rate. Less than one person out of five has electricity and only one out of fifteen inhabitants of the continent has a telephone line.

As can be seen from the numbers, the demand for economic and social infrastructures, which are essential for poverty reduction, economic growth, human capital development, investment attraction, business development and good governance, is enormous. Hence, the next couple of decades will be decades of infrastructure development for Africa. To this end, Africa will be in need of project managers that have experience on variety of construction projects. Nevertheless, the project managers have to know, at the outset, that the environment in which they will be working is a bit risky, hence, they must have outstanding risk sensitivity and timely decision making ability. The risks vary in dimension from economic to environmental and onto political. Thus, a general knowledge of the situations of the locality will be mandatory to avoid project failure. Even then, special emphasis has to be provided to political risks.

The Role of Project Management

Thoughtful project management has a lot to contribute to solving the problems of the continent highlighted above, and also three critical political problems: nation building, fighting terrorism and mainstreaming good governance.

The fundamental cause of these three critical problems is lack of proper, responsive and resilient institutions in the countries of the continent. By its very nature,

project management has the inherent characteristic of creating institutional arrangements that could take the project to success. If integrated exit strategy could be laid out for each project, then, the institutional arrangement established by projects could be used for other purposes like infrastructure maintenance, benefit sharing, public participation and local administration. Project management can also help put in place transparent planning, financing and evaluation structures for projects. This can help mainstream a culture of more transparency and accountability among stakeholders, including local communities. Furthermore, if thoughtful recruitment of labour (skilled and unskilled) could be undertaken, projects have an immense value for income generation and decreasing terror recruitment due to economic disappointment. Generally, the institutional setting, the culture of transparency and the income generation potential of projects will have a lot to offer to meet the critical problems. However, it is only if project management is done carefully that these benefits can be tapped out of projects. If not, the with-the-project case might even be more damaging than the with-out-the-project case. One thing that must be noted is the fact that the project management style has to be customized to local situations to meet these goals.

What can Project Management Societies do?

The political, economic and technological state of Africa has led to it being underserved by international professional societies like PMI and IPMA. For Africa to benefit from these kinds of endeavors, African professionals need access to information about and services from these societies. Yet, poor communication infrastructure, low income levels, and lack of proper institutions have made African professional isolated from the global trend. The problems might have been solved if these societies had flexible operational procedures to recognize professionals in Africa, and branch national chapters. Nevertheless, the situation is too far from what is expected. The services that these societies are providing are

totally oriented toward the developed world. They fail to customize their standards to African and other developing nations' situations.

If Africa is to be served by these societies, then, the societies have to do at least two things; design customized community outreach programmes to bring developing countries on board, and prepare separate (or complementary) professional standards for these countries. Else, they will continue to be perceived as serving the rich, while leaving the needy behind.

The Prospect

It was shocking news for everyone to hear that a Nigerian citizen tried to blow up the Northwest Airlines Flight 253 in the United States. In the same way, it is also disappointing to see African dictators leading their people without their consent for three or four decades. It is terrible that constitutional democracy is being forged into illiberal democracy by authoritarian governments in the poorest continent of the planet, for the benefit of a few. Yet, the activities that are being done to address these problems, by both African and the global community, are not integrated. As such, the role of project management is also not being tapped to its fullest. As the saying goes, it is never be late for good ideas; all of the project management community, however, has to move towards using project management as an instrument for solving the real challenges of humanity. It is never too late! Not even in Africa!

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