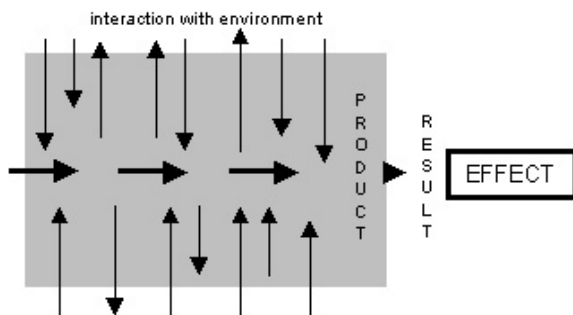# The Cultural and Political Environment of ICT Projects in Developing Countries
Rutger Rozendal

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) projects in developing countries are often a cooperation between different organisations. While organisations commit themselves to the overall goal of the project, each organisation can have completely different viewpoints on how to attain the goal. Interests and sources of power are often a better starting point to explain the behaviour of members of a project. Besides this political viewpoint, the cultural background of a project team largely determines the way the team functions. When working with people of another culture, a feeling of powerlessness may be present. This happens because, from one's cultural perspective, it may seem impossible to get a grip on why the project is organised in a certain way. Analysing the cultural and political dimensions of a project allows us to understand how the project team functions and to anticipate problems well ahead.

A project is often explicitly separated from its institutional environment. But does this mean that we should approach an ICT project as an isolated phenomenon? Can a project be executed in an engineering room, and should the commitment to the result be obtained after the project has ended?

Research (Cusworth 1996) suggests that this is not a very successful way to look at people-based projects, such as ICT projects.

Figure 1: Projects as open systems

The success of an ICT project is strongly related to the degree of acceptance of the environment. In the search for an effective organisation, we should therefor not try to design an ICT project as a self-sufficient unit isolated from its environment. It should result from a process of interaction with its environment. This process of interaction ensures that an optimum balance is reached between the technical quality and the environmental acceptance of an ICT project.

Such an open system approach however will result in a perceived decline of control over the project. Managing the 'development process' means seeking for new methods to adjust to somewhat autonomous forces from the external environment. Using the model of Cusworth (1993), project environments can be divided into cultural factors and political actors.

Cultural factors and political actors

- Political actors are organisations that have the potential to influence the course of the project.

- Cultural factors are the cultural patterns of collective behaviour that influence the project.

Although project management has some capacity to direct political actors, it is not possible to completely control the power field around a project. Cultural factors cannot be controlled by project management.

This lack of control does not make the project management powerless. By analysing the cultural and political dimensions in advance, it is possible to foresee external forces and to adjust the project. Instead of directing these forces, the art of management lies in their anticipation.

Political environment

It is quite common for a project owner not to possess all the capacity (knowledge or human resources) necessary to achieve project objectives. Thus, some project activities are outsourced to, for example, a training centre or consultants. ICT projects should therefore be approached as an inter-organisational cooperation.

It is important that, while there may be a collective 'mission' in this inter-organisational cooperation, the project can mean different things to different actors.
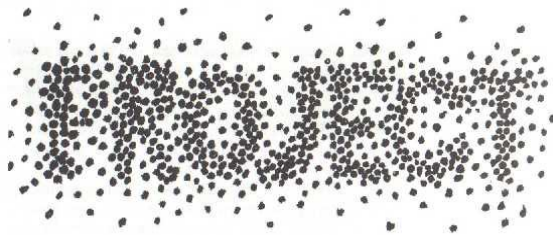
Figure 2: Subjective view on an ICT project

Instead of focussing on the collective mission, the several visions of organisational reality need to be understood – usually emerging from the specific interests of each actor.

Different interests

1. Business interests
2. Ideal interests
3. Political interests
4. Administrative interests
5. Loyalty interests
6. Emotional interests

Ideally, the interests of the different organisations blend together in the overall objective of the project. In practice, it is quite normal for the different organisations to have equal, opposite or even incompatible interests.

Build on convergent interests

Although interests will influence the project at every stage of its development, it is advisable to make a comprehensive analysis of all the (hidden) interests during a project's formulation stage. In principle, these interests should be the guiding motive of the project, and the overall project goal has to emanate from the converging interests. Negotiation in and preparation for conflicts are also part of the formulation stage of the project.

An organisation is defined as an actor when it has the capacity to influence the policymaking of a project. This definition recognises that power exists, separating those having the capacity to influence the project from those who will not.

Just as the influence of a political party varies according to the number of seats it has, the influence of an organisation varies according to the power it possesses. In analysing the different means of power, one should pay attention to various sources.

Sources of power

1. Formal power
2. Control over scarce resources
3. Power of expertise
4. Power through informal networks
5. Status

To promote his or her own interests, every actor will develop a working strategy. This strategy is highly dependent on an actor's interests and sources of power. We have to keep in mind that the actors in a project are always interacting in a situation of interdependence.

Strategies in situations of interdependence

1. Cooperation
2. Coalition
3. Competition
4. Competition limitations or cartelisation
5. Struggle or fight
6. Avoidance
7. Merger

The project can run into difficulties if conflicting interests lead to political strategies such as avoidance, competition or fights. To avoid these strategies, the technical skills of project management have to be complemented by those of change management and of communication, negotiation and advocacy.

With such political skills, project managers may be able to direct the process of decision-making in such a way that it ends up in a win-win situation. When the actors believe that the suggested compromise contributes at least partly to their interests, they will give a go-ahead.

Seen from this misty jungle of interests, sources of power and strategies, the management of an ICT project is not complicated as far as delivering an IT system is concerned.

The art of ICT project management lies in constructing a project that mobilises enough commitment among the different stakeholders without setting objectives that are so vague that every actor can interpret them according to their own interests.

Cultural environment

To understand the way the members of a project work together, it is necessary to look further than the coordination rules and procedures that are stated in common literature on project management.

The way a project team will define a problem, develop possible solutions and implement a new method of working is conditioned by the cultural environment of the project.

Cultural environment

The shared norms and values of a project team form the cultural environment of a project. They are reflected in the way decisions are taken and in which collective action is executed.

Societal level

To explain cultural behaviour, we have to compare cultures and search for the aspects in which they are different. To this end, cultural anthropologists have developed variables on which cultures can be different or similar.

1. Time orientation
All cultures are conscious of time and organise themselves around their concepts of time. Here, we can distinguish 'sequential' versus 'synchronous' notions of time. In sequential time, increments hurry along an irreversible sequence of seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and years. In synchronous time, people allocate a notion of time to events and opportunities that repeat themselves.

2. Universalism versus particularism
Universalism searches for sameness and similarity, and tries to impose on all members the laws of their commonality. Particularism searches for differences, for unique and exceptional forms of distinction that render phenomena incomparable and of matchless quality.

3. Power distance
Power distance is the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organisations accept power that is distributed unequally. Individuals from high power distance cultures accept power as part of society. As a result, superiors consider their subordinates to be different from them, and vice versa.

4. Oral culture
Many developing countries have oral-based cultures. This has great impact on the communication patterns of a society and thereby on the use and reach of information technology. In such countries, communication patterns follow an oral flow in which radio is often more popular than newspapers or online news services.

Organisational level

Although the norms and values of a project team can be traced back so societal behaviour, a single organisation can also accomodate a culture with its specific norms and values.

1. Centralisation
Centralisation is a dimension that describes the extent that decisions are taken by its central and higher levels. The degree of centralisation of an organisation is determined by the extent to which behaviour of its members is shaped by decisions at the higher levels.

2. Bureaucracy
Bureaucracy is the extent to which organisational activities are prescribed or bounded by formal procedures. In a highly bureaucratic culture, the organisation rests on functions or specialties defined by the organisational activities. The organisation works through an established system of rules and procedures, in which the function is more important than the personality of the person holding the post.

3. Task culture
The task culture exists to achieve a specific goal or set of goals, of which successful implementation of a project is an example. In a task culture, expertise is the key factor in determining an individual's fit for a job.

4. Public or private
While organisations in the public sector have a political, social and economic focus, private organisations are primarily focussed on profit. Thus, members of public organisations tend to operate in a more politicised culture than members of the private sector.

Different meaning of everyday concepts

An important note in the discussion on the influence of the cultural environment is that cultural factors tend to change the meaning of concepts in the everyday working environment.

The best example is the concept of a meeting. Due to the synchronous notion of time and higher power distance in developing countries, a meeting can be seen as a ritual session that enables the leader to consolidate his authority. Although decisions are announced at these meetings, the actual process of making a choice between the interests of different stakeholders seems to follow an informal course.

Project planning

To focus on the interaction with the environment, project managers need to find a planning method that incorporates a repetitive evaluation of the political and cultural influence into the strategic decision-making process of the project. This can be done by switching from the more usual 'design' approach to a 'developmental' approach to project planning.

Option 1: The design approach
The design or blueprint approach assumes that a clearly defined problem and an organisational change require a result-orientated approach. Project managers see to use universal rules and methods.

These methods start by determining a clear objective and design abstract models of the future situation. Emphasis is laid on large-scale implementation of these abstract models, and the changing process is mostly coordinated by the top of the organisation using a centralised and highly formalised decision-making procedure.

In the design approach, a clear distinction is made between the design of the new organisation, which is done in an engineering room, and its operation. The implementation of the project focuses mainly on the acceptance of the systems devised or provided and the search for solutions to get rid of resistance.

Option 2: The developmental approach

As an alternative to the design or blueprint approach, Rondinelli (1983) described the adoption – or developmental – approach. This contains experimental, pilot, demonstration and production stages.
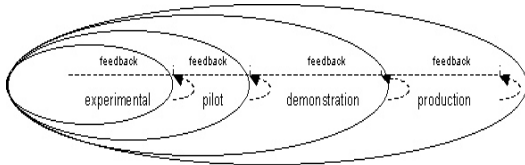

Figure 3: The developmental approach

Within the experimental stage, the problem, the objectives and the possible methods of analysis and implementation are identified. These are applied on a smaller part of the project (pilot). Within this pilot project, the project team evaluates the usefulness, adaptability and acceptance of methods used. The degree to which this evaluation results in a mutual understanding of the most successful method will determine the strategy to be used in the next stage of the project.

Adopt the developmental approach

The implementation of an ICT system requires a strategic vision in which the path towards reaching the objectives is clear. To develop this vision, the project team has to devise new ways of organising the work. Seen from this point of view, the implementation of an ICT project requires a certain distant drawing-table approach. There

is nothing wrong with that, but it is important that the technicians or top of the organisation are not the only ones who have to see things from this strategic point of view.

The advantage of the developmental approach is that a strategic point of view is confronted by environmental influences at an early stage of the project (pilot). By evaluating the results of the pilot, future users as well as technicians understand that they will have to get out of their daily working environment and start drawing plans for the future.

> *Creating a new organisation on a drawing table is only interesting when all the participants have a pen.*

The decision-making process

The choice between a design or a developmental approach is key to the process of decision-making within the project. In a design approach, decisions on the execution of a project are determined within a previously designed project plan (formulation phase). In contrast to this drawing-table approach, the developmental approach incorporates the learning process of a project into decision-making. The belief that a project can be executed by applying carefully thought-out plans is abandoned to make room for the fruitful insights that will arise throughout the learning process during the execution of the project.

---

iicd

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
COMMUNICATION AND DEVELOPMENT