# PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT: A KEY TO SUCCESS IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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Performance improvement holds great potential for improving the results of international development projects, serving public and private organizations in growing economies. The field of international development, in turn, has much to teach practitioners of performance improvement. In this article, the authors discuss the elements of performance improvement already being applied and suggest key benefits of expanding the application in development projects, for example, rural road construction in Bolivia or teacher training in Uganda.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT projects can be challenging for even the most experienced project managers. These projects frequently rely on a plethora of partners with varying goals, and they cut across multiple sectors. Moreover, the projects encompass a variety of political and social agendas that are continually scrutinized from local, national, regional, and international perspectives. Due to these challenges and others, most development projects ultimately take years to develop and implement. Yet they are worth the effort: Despite these obstacles, they often produce significant outcomes that change lives and strengthen social structures.

In an effort to maximize the impact of development projects, ranging from school construction in sub-Saharan Africa, to dam development in Asia, to economic policy reforms in Latin America, managers apply many of the popular leadership and project management tactics commonly used in all large businesses. These tactics are frequently considered "best practices" even when there is little evidence to suggest that they are either effective or efficient management techniques, let alone useful within complex global environments (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Therefore, in addition to the innate challenges of development projects, the misguided application of "best practices" complicates outcomes, and many development projects struggle to achieve desired results despite the investment of significant money, time, and energy.

There are better ways to achieve these goals. Research-based principles and practices, such as those developed within the performance improvement (PI) field, hold great potential to improve the results of development projects. In this article, we examine the value of systematic PI tools in the development context and how the principles of the field can be used to accomplish significant development results. Focusing on applications at the project level rather than the institutional level, we hope to initiate a professional dialogue that pulls together the research and practices of two relatively young fields: international development and PI.

Both fields have much to gain through enhanced integration and mutual learning. PI professionals may, for example, learn about the application of models and interventions in international, complex, adaptive contexts, while development professionals may find that the tools (including principles, theories, models, processes, practices, and techniques) of PI can offer innovative ways to overcome practical challenges. Both fields share a foundational focus on improving the quality of life of people, as highlighted in PI literature on strategic planning and needs assessment (see Kaufman, 1998, 2000, 2011; Watkins, West-Meiers, & Visser, 2012). Eventually

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other fields, such as human resources, training, and organizational development, may also want to join this important dialogue. To continue the dialogue, we encourage others to expand on this introduction by examining other intersections of these fields through articles in this journal, in blog postings, and even in conversation with colleagues.

*The complexities of development projects illustrate the potential value of PI tools.*

## DEVELOPMENT

International development projects (which we will refer to as simply development projects) are among the primary mechanisms by which significant economic strides are often made in developing countries. With funding from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), development banks, the United Nations, and government agencies, development projects are created and implemented to improve the quality of life of communities around the globe.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2011), development assistance reached $133 billion in 2011. This is a staggering investment, and the vast majority of this assistance gets applied at the project level. Given the size of investment and the general lack of immediate return to investors, development projects are also under constant scrutiny to maximize their impact. The United Kingdom's Department of International Development has committed to reducing its overhead from 4% to 2% by 2014 (International Development Committee, 2011), and New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs is working to reduce its overhead from 12% (McCully, 2011). Thus, development projects are clearly where concepts are put to the test and results are very publicly achieved—or not achieved.

Development projects are diverse by their nature. For instance, development projects in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake encompassed everything from emergency medical care to economic policy reforms. Still other development projects include the construction of irrigation systems in Asia and microfinance programs in Africa. These surface differences in projects do not even begin to illustrate the complexities that are found at the project level, where development players from multiple countries and organizations might be working within many sectors in the same country at the same time. Moreover, development projects often take years to design and implement, which requires the projects to be resilient to changes in economic conditions, the environment, political structures, and the like.

The complexities of development projects illustrate the potential value of PI tools, especially at the project level. PI, with its systematic principles and practices for linking activities with desired results at all stages of a project, offers capable processes for dealing with these widespread challenges. For instance, development projects routinely engage national government ministries in their work, and these relationships frequently warrant improving the capacity of the ministries to sustain the project results long after the initial activities have ended. In these instances, many PI processes and interventions can be applied in institutions that have immediate demand for performance and few structures for supporting its improvement.

PI has a great deal to learn from development research and practice. For decades, development projects have dealt with the practical implications of globalization, offering opportunities to learn what works and does not work in diverse countries, many of which are today's emerging markets. From regional perspectives on workplace performance to international collaborative relationships, development projects can offer foundational guidance for global applications of PI. At the same time, the complexities of development projects can help PI refine its theories and practices in order to remain relevant in a global marketplace.

## PRINCIPLES OF PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

As practitioners of PI are well aware, the field developed out of the simple observations that organizations are complex, and unilateral changes (e.g., training, quality management, mentoring, talent management, restructuring) will not achieve desired results in most situations. With roots in fields such as human factors engineering, psychology, education, and human resources, PI applies the principles of systems theory to the improvement of human and organizational achievements.

PI tools are grounded in a definition of *performance* that is not based on its popular use, and this often leads to confusion. When striving to improve performance, we must know what we are striving to improve. Thomas Gilbert (1978) therefore defines *performance* as "a transaction that involves both behavior and its consequences"

(p. 16), which is quite different from the more familiar use that links performance solely to actions. The benefits of shifting to this definition are significant, focusing attention on the results to be accomplished prior to selecting from possible behaviors, activities, or interventions.

PI principles guide decisions and actions in a variety of settings and contexts (see http://www.ispi.org/content.aspx?id=54):

- Focus on outcomes.
- Take a systems view.
- Add value.
- Establish partnerships.
- Be systematic in the assessment of the need or opportunity.
- Be systematic in the analysis of the work and workplace to identify the cause or factors that limit performance.
- Be systematic in the design of the solution or specification of the requirements of the solution.
- Be systematic in the development of all or some of the solution and its elements.
- Be systematic in the implementation of the solution.
- Be systematic in the evaluation of the process and the results.

These principles offer general guidelines that can be applied within a number of models, frameworks, and processes, including those of project management, organizational development, human resources, and, of course, PI.

In application, PI works to ensure alignment of these 10 principles. PI is, however, a field driven by practice more so than theory. Most frequently, its tools are either responding to the experiences and requirements of practitioners or derived from theories or practices of other fields. There are nevertheless a number of useful PI theories (including those of Thomas Gilbert and Richard Swanson) and models (such as those described in Wilmoth, Prigmore, & Bray, 2009) that guide practitioners and researchers.

In application, many of these principles are already aligned with best practices in the design and implementation of many development projects, yet rarely are they applied together in an organized way. For example, establishing strong partnerships is an essential element of most development projects, from initial proposals all the way through implementation. These partnerships are not, however, always an integrated component of a systematic assessment to define and set priorities across multiple needs, or into the specification of criteria for choosing useful solutions. Thus, while formal and informal partnerships are frequently established (though not always maintained) in development projects, they do not achieve their desired benefits when they are not part of subsequent decisions and activities.

## PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT IN DEVELOPMENT

The difference in perspectives between PI and traditional approaches to project management is often most apparent in the conceptualization of a development project, where identifying activities (such as building schools, making policy reforms, or loaning money) often precedes defining the desired results of those actions. While results agendas are now common in most development institutions, the results (such as those routinely found in project logic models) are most commonly used to rationalize a decision that has already been made. For example, the outcomes of an irrigation project may frequently be determined after the decision to pursue an "irrigation solution" was already made (with adding irrigation being a "behavior" decided on without first defining the desired "consequences"). The PI research literature tells us that this use of results to justify already-made choices is not an effective decision-making technique (Nutt, 2008).

At the same time, we know from the PI literature that results should not be completely separated from associated behaviors. Gilbert (1978) defines *worthy performance* as a function of valuable accomplishments to costly behaviors. This ratio of accomplishments to costs is thereby the essential definition that guides PI and what distinguishes it from process-focused or solution-focused approaches. Thus, PI theory and models systematically guide the alignment of what is to be accomplished with the processes and tools used to achieve those results.

The application of this important definition and the implications of this change in perspectives are therefore most essential at the beginning of a project, before a decision has even been made to pursue a particular set of activities. This front end of project planning, which occurs before proposals are drafted, is the starting place for successful performance improvement and successful development projects. Samset (2009) describes this early stage as "when fundamental choices are made, when uncertainty is at its highest, freedom to choose is at its optimum and available information is most restricted" (p. 22).

Although the ideal time to start applying PI in development projects is clearly before the project begins, the reality is that most often performance is not considered until well after the decisions that initiate a project are

made. Many factors lead to this reality, including the political importance of offering solutions to problems, the desire to "get things done," and the relative ease of implementing solutions when the results to be achieved are not well defined. But even in these instances, PI models and processes are still effective tools for guiding decisions, which frequently begin with a request for training. Training remains, after all, the most commonly applied tool for improving human performance in most organizations; and for development projects, training is often the only known tool for what is typically called capacity development.

This challenge of putting PI to work early in the project cycle is just one example of the difficulty of implementing it in development. Although the foundations of PI are straightforward in many ways, putting these principles into practice can be challenging for project managers. For example, project managers may struggle with such complex tasks as building foundational collaborative relationships, designing complex yet flexible project plans, managing multiple work teams, monitoring the achievement of results on many levels, and perhaps even trying to accomplish all these tasks simultaneously. The result is that development projects typically employ numerous models and theories that are related to PI as a whole, and PI-like tools and techniques get applied in achieving results. However, there is a lack of strategy and cohesion in applying these principles, leading to less-than-optimal performance.

A useful metaphor could therefore be that PI is a toolbox containing a wide variety of tools and resources for accomplishing desired results. But this is not a cluttered, messy toolbox like the one in a garage. Rather, PI provides an organized set of tools, as well as a body of research literature that can assist in applying the various tools that would otherwise be scattered. Some of the tools in the box are distinctive (such as needs assessment and performance analysis), and others are shared across many disciplines (such as survey development and change management programs). And the toolbox is always growing, adding new tools from numerous places as they are developed and validated in research and practice (e.g., electronic performance support and social networks).

Although the metaphor is far from ideal in describing all characteristics of the field (e.g., the toolbox may not fully illustrate the diversity of projects in which PI is applicable), it does illustrate the value of a field that is not based on a single solution but rather the processes used to define and accomplish desired results.

As one example of this toolbox in action, human and institutional capacity development (HICD) is an initiative that works to apply PI principles in projects funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). In this case, PI principles are applied to addressing challenges on the ground in developing countries as opposed to challenges in the structure of a given project's implementation. Based on foundational PI tools, the recommended HICD framework shifts capacity development efforts in USAID projects from a specific focus on training to a broader perspective of improving performance. The contrast of the two approaches is summarized in Table 1.

An HICD manual is available online (USAID, 2010) and is worth reviewing. In this article, however, our focus is on applying the more general principles of PI in development projects, regardless of the specific requirements of the funding agency or particular models for guiding their use.

## VALUE OF CROSS-OVER RESEARCH

Although PI principles lay the foundation for taking certain actions, the value of PI comes through its application of research-based practices. From evidence that guides the use of cognitive task analysis and performance management, to research findings suggesting the most appropriate combination of training and nontraining activities, research from many disciplines can and should guide the design, implementation, and monitoring of any project, including development projects.

As we have noted, PI draws inspiration from a wide breadth of other fields, and as a research-driven discipline, this also links to the science behind those fields. Sometimes research from varied disciplines provides clear insights that can easily be applied in the improvement of human and organizational performance, such as organizational behavior research on the amount of time required too for staff to return to productivity after a distraction (LeRoy, 2009) or the outcomes of discovery decision-making processes (Nutt, 2008). At other times, the direct application of research is less clear, such as research on organizational learning from failure (Madsen & Desai, 2010). Many times this second type of research, which does not have a direct influence on practice, has a significant influence on the development theories that get applied later in practice. Research in design thinking could be considered an example, but only time will tell how much it influences theory and subsequent practice (see Serrat, 2010).

We do not intend to imply that development is a discipline without its own research foundations. Rather, akin to PI, development projects seek clues to success in both the research of varied disciplines and traditional development research. Therein lies more potential value of examining the intersections of these fields.

**TABLE 1 USAID'S HUMAN AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH COMPARED TO A TRADITIONAL TRAINING APPROACH**

| TRAINING | HUMAN AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT |
|---|---|
| An event | A process |
| Follow-up with individual performers | Continuous measurement process |
| Based on learner needs | Based on organizational needs |
| Evaluated by individual performance | Evaluated by organizational performance |
| Focus on one or few individuals | Focus on systems approach to improve performance |
| Single type of performance solution | Multiple types of performance solutions |
| Training needs assessment | Performance assessment |
| Results oriented at participant level | Results oriented at organizational level |
| Can be ad hoc | Must be systematic |

*Source:* USAID (2010).

## THE SCIENCE OF DEVELOPMENT

Although development is a relatively new field that began in earnest only after World War II, its foundations and evolution can shine light on intersections with PI. From the 1950s, with much of the globe requiring reconstruction and the threat of the Cold War spurring efforts to squelch communism, both the United States and countries in Europe increased aid abroad. Diplomatic efforts such as the Marshall Plan, as well as aid institutions, emerged, including the United Nations and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the precursors of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund.

With this evolution of the field, development research methods have also begun to emerge as formal processes. The concept of development studies has blossomed into a branch of social science that now boasts programs and research at a majority of leading universities in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States. Its students and academics generate volumes of research on how development funds are decided, are spent, and generate results each year, and the collection of this research may represent a potential trove for analysts seeking examples of PI tools in action.

In the field, meanwhile, methodologies and standards have been formalized that can enrich and challenge the understanding of complementary PI approaches. One such process is the rapid results approach (RRA), a structured methodology that mobilizes a community to action with a series of short-term deadlines and a variety of PI tools, such as performance monitoring and gathering input from a variety of stakeholders. Another example is a set of guidelines to manage for development results (MfDR), set forward at a roundtable by the so-named board of international development professionals (http://copmfdrafrica.ning.com/page/what-is-managing-for):

1. Focusing the dialogue on results at all phases of the development process
2. Aligning programming, monitoring, and evaluation with results
3. Keeping measurement and reporting simple
4. Managing for, not by, results
5. Using results information for learning and decision making

## APPLYING PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Integrating PI tools (including principles, theories, models, processes, practices, and techniques) into development projects can happen at several places during the project life cycle. For instance, each of the following steps offers opportunities to apply PI principles: defining the

problem or opportunity, conceptualizing a project, defining the goals and objectives, improving initial proposals, establishing a management plan, beginning implementation, monitoring performance, and evaluating achievements.

In application, PI supplements and complements rather than replaces many other project-related activities. Its tools are not a substitute for quality project management techniques and do not replace strategic planning, conflict resolution, risk analysis, or other activities that development projects frequently require for success. What PI offers is a number of tools that support the alignment of these practices with the accomplishment of desired results.

For instance, in 2009 the Ministry of Public Education in Lao People's Democratic Republic (with its development partners) established a 5-year strategic plan to guide its educational programming, the Education Sector Development Framework, whose goals are directly linked to the government's long-term plans to exit from its economic status as a least developed country. To complement the framework goals, in 2010 the government was awarded a $30 million Education for All/Fast Track Initiative grant to support its education programs targeting the poor. While many activities led up to these milestones and many project activities will be required to achieve the desired results, the PI tool of performance-focused needs assessment was able to complement and improve the alignment of the other project-related activities. The ministry sponsored and developed training programs and tools to enable provincial- and district-level employees to carry out simple needs assessments to collect information about local gaps in results as well as priorities for the localities.

## PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT IN PROJECT DESIGN, IMPLEMENTATION, AND MONITORING

The design of development projects, beginning with conceptualization and ending with a submitted project proposal, is in and of itself a project that must be managed and an area where PI tools can be applied.

Needs assessment is likely the foundation of all PI-related processes and tools. Allison Rossett (1987), professor emerita at San Diego State University, defines *needs assessment* as "the systematic study of a problem or innovation, incorporating data and opinions from varied sources, in order to make effective decisions or recommendations about what should happen next" (p. 3). Thus, needs assessments guide the earliest decisions that link long-range strategies (such as reducing poverty) to later decisions about actions to take (such as what actions will best reduce poverty in a given context).

*Needs assessment is likely the foundation of all PI-related processes and tools.*

Needs assessments systematically study performance to define gaps between desired results and current achievements, establishing clear and measurable criteria for comparing alternative solutions. Applying tools such as fault tree analysis, cognitive task analysis, and multi-criteria analysis, the needs assessment guides decisions about what should be accomplished and how (Watkins et al., 2012).

For PI (or even capacity development), the needs assessment is the essential tool for creating what Gilbert (1978) called "worthy performance"—linking valued accomplishments to justifiable behaviors. For example, worthy performance requires that an archer both shoots the arrow (behavior) and hits the target (accomplishment). Likewise, to achieve valued performance development, projects must be implemented and achieve desirable results—both behavior and accomplishment. The assessment process therefore links these by focusing on needs before determining what solutions (behaviors) can best achieve results (accomplishments). More specifically, Roger Kaufman, professor emeritus of Florida State University, defines it as a systematic process for identifying, documenting, and prioritizing gaps in results based on the cost to meet the need versus the cost to ignore the need (Kaufman, 1998; Kaufman, Oakley-Brown, Watkins, & Leigh, 2003; Watkins et al., 2012).

In this context, needs assessments use a number of PI activities that stretch from strategic planning and performance analysis to predictive return-on-investment analysis to intervention selection (Watkins & Leigh, 2009):

- Strategic planning
- Needs assessment
- Future search
- SWOT analysis
- Performance analysis
- Task analysis

- Cause analysis
- Intervention selection
- Intervention design
- Return-on-investment analysis (predictive or summative)
- Results monitoring
- Program evaluation

Each of these can guide decisions about what to do next in the context of worthy performance.

These earlier decisions of development projects are complex, such as deciding when to build high-speed rail, when to implement tax reforms, how to feed a population, or how to fight disease. At this stage of the project life cycle (before any commitments to activity have been made), "the consequences of decisions will be highest, while the information available is at its lowest," according to Williams and Samset (2010, p. 38). Keene (2007), for example, highlights numerous case examples of how development projects have failed to accomplish valued results. Each offers insights as to potential value and possible risks of implementing performance improvement approaches in development projects.

One example given by the Red Cross (2006) is that of a needs assessment for a child survival project. Whereas the community may feel that a fully equipped medical center will improve survival rates, a thorough needs assessment may determine that the majority of the challenges lie in properly treating diarrhea. Therefore, the most effective course of action is to increase knowledge and resources for home treatment and improve transportation for the rarer emergencies. Such a strategic approach can increase the information available to improve the consequences of the resulting decisions.

Like capacity development, PI results are achieved through a variety of interventions or activities that are rarely unique to the discipline (see Table 2). Drawing on research and practice from fields including organizational development, psychology, human resources, management, and training, interventions can be woven together in project design to accomplish desired results.

During project implementation, PI also offers tools and processes that can be integrated to achieve results in terms of the project itself and supporting the accomplishment of results in partner institutions such as client ministries, donor partners, and nongovernmental organizations. When those interventions are identified, compared, contrasted, and selected through systematic PI processes such as needs assessments, then alignment leading from significant accomplishments (such as reducing poverty or HIV/AIDS) to implemented interventions is dramatically improved (Watkins et al., 2012).

**TABLE 2 EXAMPLES OF COMMON PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT INTERVENTIONS**

| | |
|---|---|
| Change management | E-learning |
| Incentives, rewards, recognition | Job aids |
| Job crafting | Job previews |
| Knowledge management | Managerial coaching |
| Mentoring | Motivation programs |
| Outsourcing | Outsourcing |
| Performance feedback | Performance management |
| Performance support | Process redesign |
| Recruiting | Restructuring |
| Structured on-the-job training | Succession planning |
| Training | Cultural agility |

For example, ministries (like most other large organizations) routinely struggle to develop and maintain their capacity to implement long-term reforms or projects. From recruiting teachers for rural schools or offering meaningful incentives for regional staff, to reducing the time required for new staff to perform essential tasks or overcoming internal bureaucratic obstacles, building the capacity of governmental and nongovernmental institutions is often critical to the accomplishment of development results.

In the complex and adapting contexts of development projects, monitoring (potentially even more so than evaluation) has become an essential tool for project managers. This routine and consistent collection of data to gauge progress, establish trends, and ensure overall quality provides the data necessary to make justifiable decisions at all stages of project design and implementation. From performance management to developmental evaluation, PI brings tools to projects to measure progress toward desired results. These and other PI tools frequently complement the logic models (Kellogg Foundation, 2004) used for planning and evaluation in many development projects.

Development projects stand to gain much from this type of systematic monitoring planned into the project from the beginning. This was clearly evidenced by the

Mexican government's Oportunidades program, a conditional cash-transfer system that gained acclaim for both its systematic monitoring and evaluation system (as compared with previous scattered evaluations) and for the project's subsequent success (Rubio, 2011).

Throughout all phases of a project, from design to evaluation, PI tools (including principles, theories, models, processes, practices, and techniques) can be used to systematically and measurably improve results. The PI approach, through interdisciplinary connections, ideally expands project planning and implementation to include the most useful tools regardless of their disciplinary origin. This pragmatic approach to achieving worthy accomplishments is, we suggest, a valuable mate for development projects for which complexity is a daily reality.

## CONCLUSION

PI tools will not build bridges, cure disease, or relieve the psychological challenges brought on by generations of poverty. They do, however, hold significant potential to improve the effectiveness of development projects to do these things. PI practitioners and researchers, at the same time, have much to learn from the complexity and dynamic nature of development. PI can continue to mature into a global field without expanding its application in development projects, where real-world problems require the best systemic, and systematic, approaches to accomplish valuable results. Nothing less will do.

In this article we have identified a number of intersections where development projects and PI cross paths—where professionals in both fields can find value in the work of others. We hope that this is just the beginning of an ongoing professional dialogue. We believe that both fields have much to gain by learning from the other: sharing experiences, collaborating on research, and achieving valuable results that improve the quality of life for people around the world.

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