

## **In-Between or Neither-Nor? Challenges and Opportunities for Meso Management in Development Projects**

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### **Abstract**

International Development addresses a vast array of issues that comprise processes of social and economic transformations, ranging from high-level policies to down-to-earth interventions. Projects and programs have a crucial role in leveraging economic, social, and cultural changes as anticipated in the organization's strategies.

However, strategy and execution do not always fit properly. Frequently, the distance between the macro level where policies and strategies are defined and the micro level where the interventions actually have to occur is very large. Different perspectives, perceptions, interests, and stakeholders' needs, as well as different management tools and techniques used at each level, often result in a strategy to execution gap.

This article draws attention to the importance of the meso management level, which focusses on the inter- and intra-organizational management and thereby helps to bridge the gap between the macro and micro levels. However, to be effective it has to face challenges related to project governance and required management competencies.

## Introduction

When it comes to development, one can find many different definitions and very distinct vantage points. Some of the concepts carry a political or ideological connotation, others are more pragmatic. However, there is a common understanding that it is a very complex process and that there is no simple and unique solution. Consequently, there are different theories and approaches as well as different policies and strategies. But independent from which focus is chosen or what areas are prioritized, all kinds of intervention need a means to pursue the goals—and project management has been a very important means to do so.

In this article, development is understood as a “process of economic and social transformation that is based on complex cultural and environmental factors and their interactions” (Business Dictionary, n.d.a). Although development is generally used in a broader sense referring to transformation of communities or even societies, it can and should also consider the development of organizations. Without the transformation of organizations—public or private—development is not be able to occur. The definition of organizational development is even more explicit and reveals some of the effort that is needed to achieve transformation. “In an organizational context, (transformation is) a process of profound and radical change that orients an organization in a new direction and takes it to an entirely different level of effectiveness (Business Dictionary, n.d.b). The conjunction of both types of development is important because without organizational changes, and consequently changes in the way of delivering goods and services, development of an economy and society can hardly occur.

When regions, countries, societies, or economies are considered less developed, the question always arises about what to prioritize, where to start, and how to begin. Since the array of challenges is generally vast, the choices are difficult to make. Infrastructure is always key, economic growth seems an obvious solution, and considering technology, business environment, trade, jobs, housing ... the list seems endless. Most of these challenges are tackled through projects, generally using knowledge from the management of engineering projects. Although there is considerable ongoing change in the understanding of modern project management, there are still some predominant assumptions. For example, the results can be predicted and, if necessary, repeated as long as there is sufficiently detailed planning. Once there is a consistent plan, it just needs to be properly executed. Another assumption is that complex entities can be understood by breaking them down into their smaller units. It might require considerable technical knowledge and skills, but in principle, these units could be handled. Another is that there is a direct relation between inputs and outputs and by defining adequately the inputs and dominating the processes, the output would be predictable. Finally, the last assumption is that if the processes and the time are well controlled, the success of the project would be almost

guaranteed. For deployment projects, this is a quite reasonable approach, but for development projects, it does not work the same way.

According to Ika:

International Development (ID) projects differ greatly from standard projects in the project management literature and in practice. They are bound by a common goal of contributing to economic growth or poverty reduction. As such, they are generally not-for-profit projects. ID projects are altogether technical, social, and political undertakings. They are social because they aim to directly or indirectly improve the wealth of the population, and political because the choice of project options, such as locations or target groups, is often a political decision ... (2012, pp. 28–29)

This makes ID projects very complex which, in turn, contributes to a high failure rate. A McKinsey-Devev survey pointed out that 64 percent of ID projects do not meet established objectives (Hekala, 2012). But complexity is not the only reason for project failure. Ika (2012, p. 31) suggested that there are at least three major project management problems in International Development: structural/contextual, institutional/sustainability, and managerial/organizational. The sheer complexity of these problems may explain, in part, why many projects in developing regions fail, but there is also frequently a lack of competency or knowledge in project management. And there is often corruption, poor policy planning, and implementation (Ika & Saint-Macary, 2014, p. 154).

In the face of these challenges, there is obviously no single solution, much less a simple one. However, it is clear that if the solutions cannot be found only on the macro level with strategies and policies, neither can interventions on the micro level only bring significant and sustainable changes. If we recognize that “Management for Social Development consists of coordinating **interorganizational networks**” (Makote, 2006, p. 16), it must have consequences for the project management approach. Leadership competences and management tools with emphasis on communication and integration are key. This is the field of meso management.

### **Complexity and Planning – An Apparent Paradox**

If development processes are too complex to be planned, why should we plan in the first place? Development projects have to be planned and subsequently managed as any other project. However, the approach has to be different. What has become known as the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) is one of the most widely known and applied approaches. It includes a number of steps before the actual use of the framework, in order to identify needs and potentials of the future beneficiaries and to build a project design that has a higher probability to be successful.

It is important to consider that in development projects, there are not clients in the commercial sense who analyze their needs, define the requirements, and buy a service. The interpretations of needs can vary and priorities can be different for different stakeholders. Therefore, the buy-in is the first essential step toward success. Another important step is the construction of a common vision of the future, which shows where the project can lead to and what contributions are expected from the beneficiaries. No project can possibly change the situation in a community if it doesn't collaborate in some way.

But even under these circumstances, planning a project is not an easy task. Stacey's (1966) systems model can help lead to a better understanding of the challenges. It uses two variables that are very important in development projects: (1) the level of agreement between the stakeholders, and (2) the degree of certainty about facts and trends.

In development projects, the range of stakeholders is very wide, going from the highest political and institutional levels all the way down to the final beneficiaries. The differences in interests, needs, and expectations are huge, as are their power of influence and negotiation. To build solid consensus and sustainable agreement is extremely challenging.

Development projects are, by nature, characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. The number of factors that have to be taken into account adds to the obligation of public institutions to realize projects and programs even if the expectation of success is low. Different from private enterprises, public organizations cannot deny certain intervention just because the risks are high. Development projects have to learn how to deal with adverse situations and how to avoid the most dangerous pitfalls.

If we understand a project as a system, Stacey's model serves to describe concisely the four types of systems when the two variables are displayed on two axes:

**Simple:** controllable, predictable, can be repeated or reproduced

**Complicated:** limited control, partially predictable, can be repeated

**Complex:** extremely limited control, unpredictable, cannot be repeated or reproduced

**Chaos:** No control, totally unpredictable, cannot be repeated

Of course, if the project is located in the field of chaos, terminating it as soon as possible to avoid further loss should be considered. However, complicated and complex domains are prevalent in development projects, although some parts of the project may be characterized as simple. It is also important to remember that the boundaries between the domains are not clearly defined and fixed, but are rather fluid, and they may shift throughout the project life cycle.

Fitting a development project over the model would show that the management will have to deal with simple, complicated, and complex situations, and each one of them may require different tools and methods. This should be reflected starting at the beginning of the cycle with the design phase and continue until the final evaluation.

The consequences of this systems view for project management are significant. If given inputs can trigger uncontrollable processes and generate unpredicted results, some basic assumptions of project management have to be reviewed. However, this does not mean that projects shouldn't be planned or controlled; what it means is that certain realities must be recognized, such as:

- Transformational processes—organizational, economic, or social—are complex
- Complexity implies limited predictability of how the process is going to unfold and what exactly a project can achieve
- Complexity implies limited control due to both the nature of development projects that aim at changes and external factors that can and will impact the project
- Management processes need to be flexible because the change processes are not compatible with command and control models
- Management tools need to be adequate, which means that they have to help give structure and direction and, at the same time, embrace the changes

The challenge that results from these realities is to balance and connect the different levels of intervention, from strategy to implementation.

When considering development on the macro level, one finds development policies, sector strategies, or governmental programs. Their focus is aimed at generating benefits for people, communities, businesses, and society as a whole. Ideally they are also oriented toward sustainability with their economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The approaches or tools used are generally strategic planning, sector planning, or organizational planning. Although they might be very important, these plans are generally expressions of management's dreams and visions of successful results, but they are also often abstract and distant from reality. While they can help to give general orientations, they tend to be far from executable.

On the other end of the scale, there is the micro level where development projects are actually implemented. Here, the management is involved in project planning, resource management, implementation of the plan, and monitoring of activities and deliverables. The focus is rather input- and output-oriented. The common tools used are scheduling, budgeting, and tracking, among others.

## Levels of Planning and Intervention

In practice, the distance between the two levels is gigantic. Those who are responsible for strategic planning do not implement, and those who implement projects have difficulties in connecting with the strategies. This “gap between strategy and execution” (Wood, 2016) is common in public organizations as well as in private corporations, and it might help in understanding why so many projects fail, despite huge efforts to improve project management.

The missing links may be found in the meso level. Meso is a concept frequently used in sociology and economics that is designed to reveal connections between micro and macro levels. It is used to describe the middle ground of organizations and can be applied to project-oriented organizations to describe the different management functions as well as the leadership requirements. Wukich and Robinson (2013, p. 44) alerted that traditional management approaches have neglected this level. Analyzing the potential transdisciplinary contributions to project management and performance management, Waldt (2012, p. 221) developed a framework to “make provision for the potential complex interrelationships between the aforementioned two disciplines.” This framework evidences the importance of the meso level to improve both project and performance management.

Makote (2006, p. 16) describes a similar line of reasoning for the Management of Social Development, where she points out the different scopes of management:

Macro Management	↔	Norms of governability
Meso Management	↔	Inter- and intra-organizational management
Micro Management	↔	Management of operations inside of the organization

Applied to project-oriented organizations, typical project management corresponds to the micro level, whereas the meso management acts in:

- Development of implementation or intervention strategies, based on the organization’s global strategies
- Development of program and project designs that translate the strategic goals into feasible interventions
- Resource planning that connects the organization’s budget with the project’s needs
- Integration of the stakeholders, aligning needs, expectations, and opportunities

- Monitoring and evaluation of key deliverables and impacts related to the strategic goals
- Communication between the macro and micro levels, which is a key factor for any successful project and strategy

While the focus of project management is typically deliverable-oriented, the focus of the meso management level is outcome- and change-oriented. Its major tools and approaches to pursue the changes and connect them with the strategy are benefits management, impact monitoring, and risk assessment. These require a great deal of communication and stakeholder integration, which can only be done through agreed upon and approved plans and needs permanent attendance and updating, which can be too large a burden for project management. Furthermore, these functions demand skills that are not typically found in project managers.

**Table 1: Levels of planning and intervention.**

<i>Level</i>	<i>Scope</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Tools/Approaches</i>
<b>Macro</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Development policies</li> <li>➔ Sector strategies</li> <li>➔ Governmental programs</li> </ul>	Benefits- and sustainability-oriented	Strategic planning Sector planning Organizational planning
<b>Meso</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Intervention strategies</li> <li>➔ Program/project design</li> <li>➔ Resource planning</li> <li>➔ Monitoring &amp; evaluation of deliverables and impacts</li> <li>➔ Stakeholder integration</li> <li>➔ Communication</li> </ul>	Outcome- and change-oriented	Benefits management Monitoring Risk assessment
<b>Micro</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➔ Project planning</li> <li>➔ Resource management</li> <li>➔ Implementation</li> <li>➔ Activities and deliverables</li> </ul>	Input- and output-oriented	Scheduling Budgeting Tracking

Source: Author, partially based on Wukich and Robinson (2013) and Waldt (2012).

Thus, the meso management level can significantly increase the effectiveness of strategies and the efficiency of projects by closing, or at least narrowing, the strategy to execution gap. The **New Logical Framework**, first published on *ProjectManagement.com* by Pfeiffer (2016) can be an important tool to close this gap.

The New Logical Framework (NLF) is an updated and improved version that creates an explicit link between the project’s strategy and its operationalization. Thus, it helps to create a more consistent design of development projects and programs and a robust basis for the monitoring.

Its application is appropriate for any type of project that aims at change. This can be social change as seen in public sector projects, corporate social responsibility projects that many companies support, or organizational development projects that are relevant for practically all types of organizations.

As a matter of fact, if an organization realizes projects not only to create and deliver some kind of products or services, but strives for the creation of long-term benefits for itself, one could argue that all projects are development projects. However, it is widespread and notorious that many organizations frequently suffer from a strategy to execution gap (Wood, 2016).

Program management is an approach that tends to tackle this challenge. Programs and projects are complementary from a managerial point-of-view, but there are also important differences between them. While the focus of a project is the generation of deliverables, a program's focus is on the realization of benefits that are based on projects. The NLF suggests taking this into account in their application:

- There is an additional level of effects above the project.
- A program goal connects and integrates the various project outcomes.
- A program does not generate products, but effects; therefore, there are no program outputs, but rather program components.
- Program management activities are fully dedicated to coordination, while the activities of project management are focused on production.

Therefore, programs have a much stronger relation to an organization's strategy than projects used to have. They intend to create synergy between projects and align them with strategy, although development programs are often so extensive that an effective integration is an enormous challenge. To tackle this challenge, the New Logical Framework also offers methodological support.

### **Consequences for Management and Leadership**

Based on the analysis of the levels of planning and intervention and recognizing the gap between the macro and micro levels, it becomes evident that there are consequences for project management and leadership. According to Wukich and Robson (2013, p. 42), debates in administrative theory have emphasized two levels of leadership: macro-social by major political actors and micro-social at the intra-organizational level. This phenomenon can also be seen in the development context, as shown in the section about the levels of planning and intervention.

While the NLF can help to narrow this gap, it also becomes evident that there is a need for adequate leadership competences.

Strategic leadership is relatively well-defined and—in project and program management—results in the role of the sponsor, which can be applied to both the public and private sectors. Policy and decision makers need to have leadership skills that include influencing other leaders of social groups, communities, or entire societies. They need to have the capacity to create strategic visions with long-term goals, but also the capacity to motivate the stakeholders to implement the strategy.

Apart from high-level sponsors, this kind of leadership should also be present at the portfolio and program management levels.

On the other end of the scale, there is project management leadership. This field has been strongly developed in the last decade or so, and it is widely recognized that it comprehends both the subject matter knowledge and the interpersonal communication and leadership skills.

Between these two types of leadership, there is one little-recognized, but essential, level for alignment of strategy and interventions. It can be found in the roles of program management or senior project management, or there may be no specific role defined at all. To execute this function, it requires cross-boundary leadership where command-and-control management fails to work. The skills required for this level include understanding **strategic visions** generated by the strategic leadership and the capacity to translate them into feasible intervention strategies.

While **effective communication** is important for all types of leadership, it is absolutely critical for meso leadership. It must understand the essence of what the strategies are about and how the organization's work is fundamental to be able to communicate effectively within and outside the organization. This goes far beyond the generation and distribution of documents; it is also strongly linked to institutional relationships.

Development projects can hardly succeed without **cooperation** of different stakeholders. However, effective cooperation has to be built and nurtured, while constantly balancing the different interests that might even be conflicting. The creation of common goals to be shared and pursued together is as important as the establishment of alliances to overcome obstacles that might be too big for a project to tackle.

If **change** is part of the purpose of the project, change should and will happen. This may even appear paradoxical to the concept of precise project planning. But when changes happen in and around the project scope, these need to be realigned with the original strategy to avoid the risk

that the project takes a course of its own. Potentials and risks of changes have to be assessed and weighed against the desired impacts. Again, the meso level is appropriate to provide this alignment.

Finally, since many strategies fail because of their distance to reality, the translation of an overall strategy into a realistic implementation path is critical for success. To design this kind of alignment, the NLF can be of great help to meso management.

Thus, the main function of meso leadership is to connect with the macro level to make sure that the right things are done; and with the micro level, to ensure that things are done in the right way.

**Table 2: Implications for management and leadership.**

<i>Level</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Required Skills</i>	<i>Connections</i>
<b>Strategic Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decision makers</li> <li>Portfolio management</li> <li>Program management</li> </ul>	<p><b>Policies:</b> Transform social needs and political demands into policies</p> <p><b>Social leadership:</b> Influence leaders of social groups, communities, or entire societies</p> <p><b>Strategic vision:</b> Create long-term goals and motivate for them</p>	
<b>Meso Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Program management</li> <li>Senior project management</li> </ul>	<p><b>Strategic vision:</b> Understand long-term goals and envision how to achieve them</p> <p><b>Communication:</b> Develop and maintain internal and external institutional relationships</p> <p><b>Cooperation:</b> Identify and recruit potential allies; coordinate with other actors who share similar goals</p> <p><b>Change management:</b> Identify potentials for change and foster them, balancing with risks and their impacts</p> <p><b>Implementation strategy:</b> Develop and guide strategies for action</p>	
<b>Project Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project management</li> </ul>	<p><b>Professional management:</b> Subject matter knowledge, interpersonal and team leadership skills, organization, time management, communication</p>	

Source: Author, partially based on Wukich and Robinson (2013).

Apart from the appropriate tools to make this model work, it is also necessary to foster the development of meso leadership. Strengthening this can relieve the heavy burden that many project managers experience when they are responsible for implementation of a project and, at the same time, are required to get involved in organizational and strategic issues. On the other hand, it also helps strategic management to gain credibility when strategies are transformed into feasible intervention paths.

A management tool that is very appropriate to help bridging the gap is the New Logical Framework.

### **Benefits from Using the New Logical Framework**

The first and foremost benefit from using the NLF is for the strategic management of development interventions because it helps to connect and integrate the organization's strategy with the delivery of essential goods and services. It helps guide the focus toward the usage of these goods and services by the target groups to achieve the desired changes and development.

By making visible the difference between the *intervention rationale* and the *production rationale*, it becomes clear to what degree a project can be held accountable for the expected changes and where other efforts have to be added. This helps project management practitioners to focus on what is within the scope of its responsibility and allows strategic management to test its strategies.

The NLF is developed in the design phase of a project, which means that there is still a high degree of uncertainty. However, the exercise to build the production rationale is the first step to scope estimation which, once it is approved, helps to accelerate the scope detailing and becomes a guide for operational planning.

The NLF includes not only important assumptions to be analyzed and later monitored, but also requires the identification of preconditions to develop a consistent production rationale. Too many projects are concerned with outcomes and define them ambitiously, but tend to neglect the preconditions that are necessary in the first place. Both assumptions and preconditions are fundamental elements for the assessment and, later, risk management. Although it is known that because of the nature of development projects, the risks tend to be much greater than in commercial projects—accepting too-high risks puts both the project and the whole development strategy in jeopardy.

Through the efforts to identify realistic goals and substantiate them through impact indicators, the expected benefits become visible. With this, the NLF supports benefits management by

helping to view beyond project execution and lead toward what is really important—significant changes and sustainable development.

## Conclusions

The New Logical Framework is a tool which, to be effective, should be part of a **methodology** or approach that recognizes that only well-known problems have a chance to be resolved.

A NLF can be built by a single expert based on relevant information; however, it unfolds a series of advantages when developed in a **collaborative** manner. Together with participative planning techniques applied in workshops, it enables integration of a wide array of stakeholders, even if they have very different backgrounds, levels of education, or knowledge. Its visual character facilitates the understanding of the project's route as if it was a road map.

One of the main criticisms the Logical Framework Approach has received for decades is that it is supposedly very rational and rigid. While it is true that it has a certain rationality, this doesn't mean that once the Logframe is developed, it becomes a law. It contains facts and hypotheses that relate in a plausible way to one another. If facts change or hypotheses don't hold valid, the Logframe has to be reviewed and the project design may change. Therefore, to be effective, the NLF has to be used as a **dynamic tool for design and monitoring** of development projects.

Being related mainly to the meso level, the NLF is an essential **communication tool** for both the executive level and the operational level. Since effective communication is a critical success factor for projects, the value of the NLF cannot be underestimated.

The NLF is also a **governance tool** because it supports the identification and attribution of responsibilities, especially with respect to the two levels, macro and micro.

Although the NLF is only a matrix, to be useful it requires much more than just filling in the fields. There is a whole set of concepts behind it so that the practical application is not as easy as it might appear at first. When using the NLF, organizations and projects should have **managers well-trained** in the usage of the tool, as well as in the whole range of **meso leadership capacities**.

Because the NLF uses a logical structure, it does not invalidate the consideration of complexity and respective models. On the contrary, they are helpful for understanding the challenges of project management. However, it is critical that the NLF is understood only as one of the tools to support the management process. Flexible and skillful application, experience, and common sense will be crucial to help the tool develop its full potential, and with that it can definitely foster the integration of strategy and delivery of development projects.

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## Appendix 1: The New Logical Framework

A detailed description of the New Logical Framework can be accessed at:

<http://www.projectmanagement.com/articles/337043/The-New-Logical-Framework--A-Tool-for-an-Effective-Development-Project-Design>

Sisaag (Management Support System) is a web-based application using the New Logical Framework available at: [www.sisaag.com.br](http://www.sisaag.com.br) . It includes also a step-by-step guide for New Logical Framework users.

<i>Intervention Rationale</i>	<i>Impact Indicators</i>	<i>Sources of Verification</i>	<i>Important Assumptions</i>
<i>Goal 1</i>			
<i>Goal 2</i>			
			
<i>Outcome/ Purpose</i>			
	<b><i>Production Rationale</i></b>		
<i>Expected Outputs</i>	<i>Key Deliverables</i>	<i>Required Inputs</i>	<i>Preconditions</i>
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			

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