

A qualitative case study for the planning and implementation of post-conflict reconstruction projects in Kosovo.

ABSTRACT

Post-conflict reconstruction more so than any other development trajectory, must be underpinned by institutions capable of facilitating the transition from war to sustainable peace. It must also lay the groundwork for the physical, social and economic recovery of communities by adopting a comprehensive, well-sequenced and flexible approach. Knowledge of key elements and challenges for developing economic rehabilitation and reconstruction projects in long-term development strategies for post-conflict governance structures need to be identified. Much remains to be learned about the planning and implementation of reconstruction and development projects by the international/local community to make international donor assistance in conflict-related situations more effective. The study elaborates on the concept of the project delivery process, planning, implementation and monitoring in post-conflict settings.

Keywords: Planning, flexibility, instability, organising as process, risk and volatility.

1. POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION PLANNING IN KOSOVO

Reconstruction is about establishing and maintaining a system that will promote and safeguard a market-based capitalist economy (Guttal, 2005). The success and/or failure of reconstruction efforts are not only assessed by more fundamental considerations of the economic, social and political security of domestic populations, but also depend to a large measure on the speed and the extent to which, an affected country complies with any externally applicable performance standards for establishing good governance, a market economy and social well-being (Guttal, 2005).

In assessing the post-conflict development and understanding the local perspectives on recent development, 12 years after the war, Kosovo appears to be a political risk for emerging investment opportunities. Kosovo's economy remains largely dependent on the international community and the various diasporas for financial, procurement and technical assistance (Corrin, 2003). Kosovo's weak infrastructure services, such as its telecommunication network, problems with electricity and water supply to residents and businesses, and legislative and regulatory frameworks affect revenue, investments and proper business activity. In spurring economic recovery and driving long-term economic growth, most business opportunities have relied on individual enterprise in the fields of services and retailing, employing only a small fraction of the total labour force, which has contributed to weak economic performance (Sklias & Roukanas, 2007).

Drawing on Kosovo as a case study, the processes of designing, planning and implementing reconstruction and development of infrastructure projects to ensure positive outcomes was examined. Further, in order to demonstrate applicable lessons for development in similar environments, issues

specific to the broader realm of post-conflict reconstruction (PCR) as it operates in divided societies in general were surfaced.

2. CHALLENGES FOR POST-CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT

The process of development involves a myriad of international, national and local participants with scarce resources and limited skilled human capacity (Maresca, 2003). Additionally, there are intra-national inequalities, disorganised and insecure living conditions, property and human rights issues, discrimination or exacerbated violent conflict, all of which stem from an exploitative and damaging political environment (Scholdan, 2000). Repairing war-damaged infrastructure in order to reactivate the local economy is a challenge for all post-conflict countries (Schwartz & Halkyard, 2006). Rondinelli and Montgomery (2005) recommended that achieving a good outcome in a post-civil war situation required making informed decisions, promoting good governance and a better allocation of scarce resources. This also involves a clear focus and understanding of the planning and implementation processes of post-war reconstruction projects and programs which lead to nation building including the project objectives and goals. It is also critical, corresponding to practical needs, that the process of developing systematic training program ensures long-term sustainable recovery. Finally, it is vital the aid agencies and the local government have the required funding, balancing the short-term needs with long-term reconstruction (Association of U.S Army/Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2002).

The principal desire for reconstruction must emanate from the local community (Englebert, 2008) and include adequate local resources and feedback mechanisms to fully implement and enforce programs. Security and stability are major prerequisites for sustainable growth in order to continue the efforts of reconstruction (Ahmad, 2001). A major lack of capability in the identification, formulation, design and implementation of projects continues to be the substantial impediment to post-conflict countries attempting to augment the flow of capital for the benefit of the community (Rondinelli, 1976). The challenge that emerges is to address the immediate concerns for laying the foundation for PCR by means of social and economic infrastructure through a 'project-based management' approach.

3. PLANNING FOR RECONSTRUCTION DEVELOPMENT

Good planning, project preparation and good management are essential prerequisites to successful project implementation (Zwikael, 2008). Project goals should be defined and understood by the project team on the ground. Rathmell (2005) emphasised the need to identify the crucial requirements of conflicting communities in the planning process and ensure that inadequate resources, even when limited or

inadequate, were applied appropriately. In such a complex and fragile environment, it is also fundamental to have a flexible process to accommodate rapidly changing circumstances.

Rathmell (2005) asserted that in a post-conflict multifaceted society, the management, planning and reporting structures were often cobbled together in an ad-hoc manner. Experience reflects a lot of criticism of the current reconstruction process because of the perceived lack of adequate planning, lack of resources, too little funding and lack of an exit strategy (Coyne, 2006). Continued involvement in a complex and fragile environment requires organisations to ensure that there is flexibility in project planning and implementation (Natsios, 2005).

4. RESEARCH STUDY MODEL

The current study was used to examine the complexities of planning and implementing large infrastructure projects, to establish whether they address some of the problems facing post-conflict societies, to assess how they can be effectively implemented in actual communities and to explore what can be learnt from these projects to widen their application to other post-conflict situations. It has been recognised recently that project management knowledge and practices can be applied in many disciplines including sociology, psychology, education and health management (Smith, 2003; Winter, Smith, Morris and Cicmil, 2006). The use of project-based management tools, techniques and methodologies assists the successful completion of projects in a wide variety of areas and within the agreed timeline, cost and performance criteria (Smith, 2003). It is important to stress that the approach must be flexible, and it is advantageous to identify the critical parts of projects where flexibility is needed in the planning stage (Olsson, 2006). By examining the existing Kosovo planning processes and complex operational experiences of PCR development projects in a more systematic way, a hypothetical model for planning and implementing projects in post-conflict settings using 'Project-based management' was developed from previous research.

5. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

In this study, the complex challenges of planning and implementing post-conflict reconstruction projects in Kosovo were examined from a number of perspectives that included the historical aspect and current political, social and economic factors that contributed greatly to development effectiveness. By providing a better understanding of the research topic that has significant socio-economic policy implications in a post-war environment, case studies allow process (how projects are managed), contextual (post-conflict) and longitudinal (dealing with processes) analysis. In the case of Kosovo's socio-economic development, many organisations tend to use their own crafted extraordinary processes to implement projects. In order

to investigate this dynamic practice, a case study approach was determined to be the most appropriate. Although 'project-based management' processes have not been tested in a post-conflict environment, Druckman (2005) and Veal (2005) highlighted that a case study method can be used to confirm whether or not the theory was suited for adapting to a complex setting.

5.1 Data Collection

There were many international agencies involved in various development missions in Kosovo and most of these organisations had their own distinctive organisation structures, cultures and standard operating procedures (Holohan, 2003). As a result, it was determined to use participants for the study who were practitioners within the Non-government Organisations (NGOs), government personnel, donors and personnel from other national/international agencies who played a role in infrastructure reconstruction projects within the period from 2004 to 2008. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit the participants from the list who had met the criteria of having planned, designed and implemented infrastructure projects in Kosovo. Snowball sampling was used to identify additional participants who could provide information on practice-based personnel. In total 56 respondents were recruited to take part in the study process, 36 semi-structured interviews and 20 focus group participants.

5.2 Interviews

In the current study, the layout of the interview questions designed for practicing Project Managers (PM) and Country Directors/Chief of Mission (CoM) was intended to gather information on desirable skills and knowledge areas of project management, and to find the degree of satisfaction with current and previously implemented projects. Individual interviews of 30 to 45 minutes each were conducted and taped by the researcher. Following transcription, the interviews were analysed for congruence, differences and insights into the research questions.

5.3 Focus Group Discussion

In this study, the researcher purposely selected four categories of people from the community because of their technical expertise in post-conflict reconstruction and development. Each category contributed a group of five to six representatives. The four focus group categories chosen in this study were as follows:

- Management consultants training local and government agencies on project management skills;
- European Agency for Reconstruction (Electricity Generation) planning and delivery team;
- Local women's infrastructure community development organisation funded by the World Bank; and
- Ministry of Water and Sanitation.

5.4 Coding of Interviews

The coding process to find commonalities and patterns (Seidel & Kelle, 1995) involved subdividing the data and categorising it into a number of themes for the topic (Dey, 1993) after collection. Several analytical techniques were used: listening to the interview tapes, transcribing the interviews, reading and summarising the transcripts, choosing categories and linking them to themes. During the processes, key quotations were highlighted and sorted in a coherent fashion. The emergent process was contemplated again and further condensed, culminating in decisive subheadings being identified. These themes were then placed in a table format with project management themes.

6. DATA ANALYSIS

6.1 Planning for Development Projects

The majority of respondents reported that they had never come across any strategic or even basic project management plans for any of the reconstruction projects they had administered during the previous years. The respondents argued that most organisations come with an assumption that because the projects were implemented in other post-conflict countries, they should work effectively in any post-conflict situation. Some respondents also felt that planning only starts after the funding or the donor approves the project budget. Respondents reported that, though some organisations have a tentative plan on paper when it comes to implementing the project management plans, they are not detailed enough or the PMs execute what is more convenient at the time of implementation. Similarly, even though some respondents reported having reviewed organisation manuals on how to implement projects in the field, they had not seen any PM following an organisation's structured planning steps and processes. Taking into account the resources available, the well-reasoned views of the implementing agencies on how planning is taken in consideration were stated as follow:

Not a lot of them pay a lot of attention to the planning phase, the concept of spending a lot of time in the planning phase is a concept that means for most organisation it's a lost time, and you always have to just rush to working and doing stuff ... the planning phase is almost non-existent ... hence we have so many problems during implementation ... go over budget, longer time ... this is one of the major weaknesses that they have in the planning phase (PM-G2-032)¹.

6.2 Managing Cost

Respondents stated that they were aware that the cost of financing community-based projects could have a significant effect on the overall outcome for the civil society. Several respondents mentioned that managing budgets and comparing costs were a critical process for reconstruction projects; however, they do not have the tools that help to reduce costs and increase efficiency. Respondents stated that in the post-

¹ Respondents code – PM (Project Manager), CoM (Chief of Mission)

conflict environment, it is standard practice for the finance department to control the flow of funds, and the project team has little control over the handling of funds. Respondents also acknowledged that the primary tools in a post-conflict society are the project timelines and the budget and, by having appropriate tools to manage and control the project, finance estimates help minimise costs. The respondent's quote below adequately convey the current practices and needs:

I think it is very important to manage the cost especially since most of these projects are driven by strict budgets and it takes a lot of bureaucracy to change the budgets if the need arises (PM-G2-033).

6.3 Managing Project Time

Respondents identified a range of divergent variables which relate to the social, political, economic, environmental and managerial factors that could influence the successful delivery of projects in a post-conflict environment. The respondents revealed that almost a decade after the cessation of the war, a realistic summary of the current situation suggests Kosovo still has significant unmet basic needs in every sector. Due to the apparent lack of familiarity with the local environment and the changing political situation, respondents also stressed that in such an operational context, many international organisations working in Kosovo found the development processes were slowed down. Respondents categorically stated that management of the program requires a special blend of experience and skills, and that many implementing partners were limited by resource constraints when trying to deliver quality projects within budget and time. Here are just some of the many factors quoted as likely to influence the project time line:

I think first and foremost you need to consider the human factor. Who you plan to engage in the implementation of those activities and, in most cases that was one of the short falls of international consultants who implemented projects here ... and then come the short falls of not being able to complete the task in time it's a multi-effect of one, not being able to complete in time, then everything else sort of stagnates (PM-G2-033).

6.4 Project Communication Challenges

All respondents zealously stated that communication is one of the biggest problems in a conflicting society where one is working with the team, and multiple stakeholders, to deliver the project on time and to a given budget. Moreover, in addition to bureaucratic and political influences, most respondents indicated that by not having proper communications standards and processes planned out much earlier in the life of the project, it does have a strong impact on project success or failure. Respondents emphasised that, faced with a high level of uncertainty and complexity, miscommunication amongst project stakeholders, contractors and relevant government departments leads to a slowing down in the delivery of development programs. To make a practical contribution to improve the project standards, respondents stated that, in some instances, giving and receiving honest feedback both good and bad among all stakeholders would facilitate timely and effective project delivery. Finally, respondents felt that there was

a necessity for building relationships and trust between factions of the conflict-affected groups to support the peace-building agenda.

In the planning phase we need to initiate, we need to clarify, what communications processes are used, who is responsible for what, and what is the process of communication that needs to be used for decision-making, or for solving problem (PM-G2-032).

6.5 Risk Identification

There was one respondent from a community development fund organisation sponsored by the World Bank, who said the community was involved in identifying and analysing the risks in projects, and planning mitigating strategies with the project team and other stakeholders. All other respondents stated categorically that though the organisations had limited community consultation, involvement in the risk management of the project was not the norm in the organisation. Respondents mentioned that in many projects, the local municipal government was a partner in the project and controlled the power within a local community. Though many respondents considered the support of the local government to be vital, they also revealed that once the local government became involved in the project implementation process, nepotism and corruption became apparent in the system. Respondents reported that the local government then tried to impose its power and force the organisation to implement projects in areas not previously planned. Despite having to avoid all these scenarios, the organisations were cautiously optimistic about getting the community involved in the risk management of the project.

Not at all, they do not care ... they see the immediate requirement on the ground, the risk to them is nothing. They have already gone through the conflict, now they want to get on with reconstruction (PM-G2-014).

6.6 Managing Project Quality

Despite the challenges of reconstruction in a post-conflict and fragile environment, respondents revealed that only a small number of organisations' projects oversee the quality performance of all operations and ensure that administrative functions are undertaken. Respondents indicated that organisations do not have the required skills and trained resources to monitor and evaluate projects as well as assess the quality of their operations. They considered that most project staff had limited understanding of quality assurance methods, and mentioned the importance of training in quality management for engineers and field staff. Four variables were mentioned to ensure quality: having responsibilities for the selection and management of contractors, defined roles and responsibilities for the selection of materials, having critical path charts and developing project management reporting structures. There was also mention of developing a quality plan for the project along with the project proposal submitted to the donor. Respondents also mentioned that organisations often implement more than one project at a given time; by

having reporting strategies with stakeholders about the project's progress and by reporting of evaluation outcomes that needed special mention, control of the project was improved.

In the post-conflict, the quality is extremely important, because there is a huge need for infrastructure projects. Usually there is no set up unit to manage the process, to manage the quality of the infrastructure being serviced or built. Therefore, it is a big problem. Now they think of quality, they think of assembling right people to assess the quality, depends on the project of course ... now they are moving more towards it (PM-G2-012).

6.7 Managing Project Procurement

Respondents revealed that, within the limited time available, procurement does not receive due attention because organisations have complicated and time-consuming processes. Respondents also noted that plans needed to be developed through an understanding of the complex situation the country faces. The respondents also revealed that a project procurement team should understand that fraud and corruption are committed at a very high level in post-conflict societies and should ensure that the plan is flexible but also robust at the same time. Almost all respondents mentioned that the procurement plan should be an early priority for the project organisation, and the understanding of these collaborative practices needs to be transparent and further reinforced. Most respondents commented that each donor organisation does have its own procurement policies and tendering procedures, but the project team has limited understanding of the organisation's practices and standards. Respondents also reported that the project staff were not happy with the resultant delay of goods and equipment as the procurement processes were thwarted by the complex, cumbersome and time-consuming approval processes of the organisation. In general, regarding the capacity to deal with conflict situations, the respondent stated that:

Procurement plans exist, but there is no one to force these people to implement the procurement plan (PM-G2-009).

6.8 Implementing Project Standards

All respondents agreed that, given the complexity of and uncertainty in a post-conflict society, it was hard to implement standards during the emergency and transition phase. Most respondents also said the donors do try to implement their own standards and procedures, without taking into consideration the cultural factors of the conflicting communities. Further, there are many governance issues in Kosovo due to its tumultuous history because of uncertainty as to who was actually administering the country for a decade. Respondents mentioned that having stability and continuity within local governance helped to facilitate aid organisations and government institutions to effectively implement standards and processes. Respondents argued that international agencies in Kosovo have cumbersome bureaucratic procedures and try to impose them on locals within a very limited time frame. The respondents outlined ways to deal with situations of conflict:

It is extremely complex and uncertain ... just considering in a post-conflict environment where everything is disjointed ... it is difficult to stick to any standards efficiently. But it is possible, theoretically, it is (PM-G2-003).

6.9 Recommendations to Improve Planning and Implementation

Many participants responded based on practical experience of working in the field and outlined all the things that can, and do, go wrong in a post-conflict environment. The key findings emanate from the interview on how to improve project planning and implementation with reflections based on the review of relevant literature. The common variables mentioned reflect unique project management circumstances and situations which include scope, procurement, quality, human resources, cost and communication.

It should also be noted that project risk management was not specifically mentioned by any of the participants. Respondents stated that all local and external stakeholders should be empowered to participate actively in the planning process. With heavy reliance on external aid, donors should support a procurement process that is transparent and accountable. Respondents also mentioned that cost control, external audit and quality assurance procedures remain key considerations for any project. Furthermore, local communities lack many of the required skills, and aid agencies should facilitate training in project development and management issues. Respondents remarked that organisations should prioritise projects and coordinate necessary resources with the immediate needs of the community and its local government. Finally, respondents said that by having a secured environment in which to implement reconstruction projects in Kosovo, the international community should implement standards and processes acceptable to the local government and sustainable to the beneficiaries for long-term economic growth.

When you plan projects, you should really identify needs in cooperation with the recipients. Therefore, the recipient's side should be consulted, what are the most urgent needs, and then design projects according to that. Then should have ex-post evaluation when the projects are completed to learn and to see how successful they were (CoM-G1-024).

7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the absence of a clear project management framework that can act as a reference point for countries emerging from conflict, the future depends increasingly on the effective idiosyncratic implementation of projects and programs. The following criteria should be considered by the myriad of agencies involved in planning and development, with each pursuing its own agenda, interest and priorities:

- Current findings indicated it remains important to recognise that, even a decade after the conflict, international donors should seek to resolve the current political impasse and shift full political responsibility to local authorities.

- Humanitarian agencies should no longer plan civilian reconstruction and development projects in isolation. Rather, it was critical to have an effective statewide consultation and coordination mechanism between local and international agencies operating in a country.
- Findings indicated there should be an appropriate level of flexibility and a greater level of participation by stakeholders in policy and project cycle activities. Further, the PMs should be more flexible and should make special effort to ensure that the needs of the community are met and that their continued participation is meaningful.
- The research findings indicated that ownership not only introduces accountability but also increases the self-reliance of the recipients. It is critical that the project planning team consults the beneficiaries in project design and implementation.
- Projects should be approved only after understanding the overall goals and objectives, which should be clearly defined as easily measured, verifiable and finite.
- Coordination of project activities and consistency in the procedures require a proactive communication strategy and transparency in the decision-making process. Maintenance of a high level of operational awareness is necessary for project staff to achieve their targets i.e. there should be a clear exchange of information between agencies, donors and the beneficiaries.
- Control measures and policies within the project management framework should openly address the challenges of corruption at all levels of the project cycle.
- Significantly, projects do not attract continued and sustained funding by donor institutions. It is therefore imperative that funds received are well coordinated and dispersed to implement critical projects.
- Security was not a key issue for projects implemented in the majority of the provinces in Kosovo, although it remained necessary to provide a safe working environment in which agencies could operate.
- Schedule delays need to be avoided and costs must not exceed the sum of the amount allocated to projects. Organisations should initiate project risk assessments and potential mitigation strategies along with key stakeholders.

While United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) played a central role in post-war recovery and international aid played an important role in Kosovo, from the participants' responses it was apparent that the international agencies did not engage sufficiently with the local community. The study findings indicated that coordination of reconstruction activities is necessary at multiple levels within local and international agencies. Policies are needed to encourage effective planning and implementation, but at the same time, there should be flexibility to respond to local perceptions of need.

Weaknesses in planning in post-conflict countries include areas of project control, tracking, reporting, stakeholder communication and decision-making. The study identified that it is important to consider the lack of resources and the urgency for prioritisation in operation procedures. At a minimum, there are compelling reasons for a holistic approach to planning long-term development that includes the project management components of scope, cost, human resources, procurement, risk, quality, time and communication. Further, the model approach applied needs to be fully integrated.

In such a context, there are inherently high risks in the environment; hence, changes to the plan are inevitable and require continuous coordination of resources, activities, equipment and information. To reduce the high operating and transaction costs, and to allow continued growth, the ongoing assessment of risk is particularly important. The extent of the need for broader quality planning for infrastructure projects also cannot be understated. Though donors may have a monitoring and evaluation strategy for a project, the process tends to look at the cost effectiveness of the project and not only a management or product assessment.

The findings of the study also indicated that the application of agencies' procurement processes often delay and complicate project management. There are no adequate governing principles for bidding, establishing pre-qualifications or for the selection of contractors. In addition, donors/agencies often prefer the lowest bidder despite the fact that, in most cases, they fail to deliver for larger infrastructure projects. A contractor's performance can have a significant impact on the successful delivery of projects; limited capacities indicate the need to have a comparatively flexible procurement process and donors should not be encouraged to impose conditions on the process. Approving project funding with a pre-defined, calendar-based schedule is the most difficult part of project management in an uncertain and complex environment. Nevertheless, it is critical to have scheduled activities that are performed and closely monitored for progress to be achieved and confirmed. Project teams should use simple tools to monitor project schedules and take swift action for non-compliance of the activities.

8. CONCLUSION

Data presented by the practitioners point to both advantages and challenges in relation to the overall approach for setting up and managing projects. In particular, current management approaches are noted to be inadequate and have severe methodological limitations in respect to measuring the socio-economic impact of such projects. It is critical for countries and their civil society organisations emerging from conflict to have committed to adopting some basic project management strategies. This will ensure effective, transparent, flexible and participatory delivery of services to the population. With this emphasis

on project selection, project design and stakeholder participation it is appropriate to mention that, as expected in practice, the processes of project implementation did vary substantially from organisation to organisation.

The goal in the study was to develop common standards to plan and implement projects in an environment where there are uncertainties and the economy is in transition. The research findings suggest that management of a project life cycle customised to local settings can assist practitioners, humanitarian organisations, donors and policy makers know what tools and techniques to use when planning projects to rebuild communities. Practical experiences of development and the resultant outcomes that exemplify factors such as the wider participation of key stakeholders, including civil society and communities is critical. Due to the environment and in order to reach a desired outcome at the end of the project, the importance of quality, procurement and risk management, which are critical factors given the complexity of the projects is emphasised.

Systematic and comparative project management at the country level remain underdeveloped areas with little, if any, disagreement in principle from PMs and CoMs. The key issues mentioned include:

- Lack of practical experience and theoretical trained staff remains a theory-practice divide;
- Little time to train staff prior to starting the job;
- Little time to train staff on the job;
- Lack of prior planning difficult to overcome;
- Off-the-cuff planning too idiosyncratic;
- Lack of consistency across projects;
- Poor procurement practices, causing fraudulent and corrupt practices;
- Lack of coordination between agencies;
- Lack of community participation in design and planning;
- Lack of coordination among responding organisation; and
- Political uncertainty has been a significant source of instability.

As a result of this study, the findings suggest that detailed Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) strategies need to be included in a model (Appendix 1) that is divided into the five major life cycle processes: initiation, planning, controlling, executing and closing.

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APPENDIX 1

Post-conflict Reconstruction Project Management

