

# Management Practices And Project Success In Donor-Funded NGO Projects: A Literature Review

Patrick Joel Mwale\*

*University of Malawi*

## ABSTRACT

Local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in sub-Saharan Africa are the principal implementers of donor-funded development projects, yet a recurring body of evidence points to the persistent implementation weakness linked to inadequate management practices. This article reviews literature on the relationship between management practices, encompassing leadership, planning, governance, and the application of formal project management tools, and the success of donor-funded NGO projects. Literature spanning a systematic review of NGO project management practice, an empirical structural equation study of NGO-implemented development projects in Sri Lanka, NGO leadership development literature, and foundation project management theory was synthesized thematically. The review finds consistent evidence that the deliberate application of project management concepts and tools is associated with improved project outcomes, that leadership operating at multiple organizational levels shapes implementation quality, and that donor-imposed timeframes and reporting demands often constraints managerial discretion. However, much of the available empirical evidence originates from Sri-Lanka, Jordan, and other areas, with limited Malawi-specific testing of these relationships. The article concludes by identifying this contextual gap and proposing it as the empirical foundation for further study of management practices and project success among local NGOs in Malawi.

**Keywords:** project management practices, project success, NGOs, donor-funded projects, leadership, Malawi..

## INTRODUCTION

Donor-funded projects implemented by local NGOs constitute a substantial share of social sector financing in low-income and aid-dependent countries. As of 2025, local NGOs accounted for more than eighty percent of all registered NGOs in Malawi (NGORA, 2025), positioning them as the primary delivery agents for externally financed interventions in health, education, agriculture, nutrition, governance, and humanitarian response. The scale of this role makes the manner in which such organizations are managed a matter of direct consequence for development outcomes.

Management practices, which are mainly understood to include leadership behavior, strategic and operational planning, governance arrangements, and the structured use of project management tools and techniques, have for so long been theorized as the primary determinant of project performance. Within the private sector and infrastructure literature, this relationship is well established. Within the NGO and

international development literature, however, the evidence base is comparatively thinner and more fragmented, drawn largely from case studies and country-specific surveys rather from a cumulative or theoretically integrated body of work.

This article reviews literature on the relationship between management practices and project success specifically within the context of donor-funded NGO projects, with a view to establishing the conceptual and empirical foundation for an examination of this relationship among local NGOs operating in Malawi. The review addresses three guiding questions; how is project success conceptualized and measured in the NGO literature; what management practices have been empirically or theoretically linked to project success; and what gaps remain in applying this literature to local, as distinct from international, NGOs operating in resource-constrained regulatory environments such as Malawi.

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## 2. METHODOLOGY

This review followed a structured narrative literature review approach appropriate to an early-stage thematic synthesis intended to inform thesis research. Sources were identified through targeted searches of academic databases and grey literature repositories using a combination of the terms project management, NGO, project success, leadership, governance, and donor-funded, restricted where possible to development-sector and project management journals.

Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and credible sector reports published predominantly within the last two decades that addressed project management practices in NGO or international development settings. Studies addressing purely private sector or construction project management without reference to development or non-profit context were excluded, as were sources lacking identifiable authorship or methodological transparency. Selected sources were read in full or in relevant extract, coded into emergent themes, and organized thematically rather than chronologically, consisted with conventional literature review structure for management development studies.

## 3. THEMATIC REVIEW

### 3.1. Project Management Concepts, Tools, and Project Success

The intentional, as opposed to accidental, implementation of project management principles and techniques is positively correlated with project success, according to a common finding in the literature on NGO project management. According to a systematic review of project management practices across NGO projects, while standard project management concepts and tools are acknowledged in the industry, their adoption is still uneven, and NGO staff members' lack of project management expertise limits both project management performance and overall project outcomes (Jayaram & Bhatta, 2022).

A statistically significant pathway from project management success to project success was shown by quantitative evidence using structural equation modeling of NGO-implemented development

projects in Sri Lanka. Project management performance was found to have a significant direct impact on the accomplishment of more general project goals, as well as a smaller but significant impact on organizational level NGO success (Nanthagopan et al., 2019). This suggest that management practices operate simultaneously at the level of individual project delivery and at the level of organizational reputation and stakeholder confidence, reinforcing the proposition that management practice is not a peripheral administrative function but a central determinant of NGO performance.

Foundational project management theory similarly distinguishes between project management success, measured against cost, time and quality performance, and project success, measured against the achievement of broader project goals (Pinto & Slevin, 1988; Serrador & Turner, 2015). Within the NGO literature, planning, assurance, and control are repeatedly identified as the theoretically core components of project quality management, yet several studies note that these components are frequently difficult to operationalize in NGO settings owing to constrained human resource capacity and absence of dedicated project management officers, pointing to an implementation gap between recognized good practice and organizational capability (Jayaram & Bhatta, 2022).

### 3.2. Leadership and Governance in NGO Project Implementation

Leadership literature situated within the NGO sector emphasizes that leadership and management functions are closely intertwined in practice, with effective project leadership required not only at senior management level but also among middle managers who typically function as team or project leaders and are therefore central to the successful implementation of organizational strategy (Hailey, 2006). This distributed conception of leadership has direct implications for capacity-building interventions, suggesting that leadership development cannot be confined to executive level if project-level performance is the intended outcome.

A persistent theme within this literature concerns the tension between donor expectations and organizational leadership capacity. Donor-imposed project schedules, compressed timeframes, and

pressure for rapid demonstrable results have been characterized as developmentally unrealistic and as exerting a detrimental effect on the credibility and confidence of NGO leadership, constraining the pursuit of longer-term organizational goals in favor of short-term donor compliance (Hailey, 2006). This finding is particularly relevant for Malawi, where declining aid flows and heightened donor scrutiny have intensified pressure on local NGOs to demonstrate measurable management capacity.

Sustainability-oriented literature further identifies the structured adoption of project management tools, including risk analysis and work-breakdown structures, as positively associated with sustainability outcomes in NGO-implemented international development projects, while noting that adoption levels vary considerably with organizational maturity (Samara et al., 2020). This reinforces the centrality of both relational and technical management competencies to project performance.

### **3.3. Stakeholder Orientation, Governance Structures, and Contextual Constraints**

NGO project success criteria differ significantly from private sector criteria. Whereas customer satisfaction is a primary success measure in private sector project management, NGO objectives are oriented toward fulfilling community needs within accountability structures owed simultaneously to government bodies, donors, and partner organizations, requiring management practices to balance multiple, occasionally competing, stakeholder expectations rather than optimizing for a single client relationship (Nanthagopan et al., 2019). This multi-stakeholder accountability structure has been identified as a distinguishing feature of NGO project management that conventional private sector project management theory does not fully accommodate.

Literature addressing donor-NGO relationships further highlights that local NGO performance is shaped not only by internal management capability but by the broader political and resource environment within which donor funding is negotiated and disbursed, including dependence on external funding cycles and the constraints on long-term institutional planning (Wing, 2004; Strichman et al., 2008). Adaptive capacity within non-profit organizations operating in resources-constrained or politically

sensitive environments has similarly been linked to organizational learning culture and leadership flexibility (Strichman et al., 2008).

## **4. DISCUSSION: Synthesis, Gaps, and Future Directions**

Taken together, the reviewed literature supports a reasonably consistent proposition: that management practices, spanning the structured application of project management tools, distributed leadership capability, and stakeholder-sensitive governance, are positively associated with project success in NGO settings. This finding aligns with, and extends, established project management theory into a sector characterized by multi-stakeholder accountability and donor dependency not typically present in private sector applications.

Nevertheless, three key gaps are evident. First, the empirical base is geographically concentrated in Sri-Lanka, Jordan, and similar areas, with limited Malawi-specific empirical testing of the relationship between management practices and project success among local, as distinct from international, NGOs. Second, much of the existing literature is descriptive or correlational rather than explanatory, offering limited insight into the mechanisms through which specific management practices translate into project outcomes within resource-constrained regulatory environments. Third, the interaction between donor-imposed management requirements, such as compressed timeframes and rigid reporting structures, and locally available management capacity remains under-theorized, despite its evident practical significance for NGOs in Malawi.

These gaps point towards a clear avenue for further research: an empirical, Malawi-specific examination of how management practices, including planning, governance, and the use of formal project management tools, influence project success among local NGOs implementing donor projects, accounting for the distinctive donor-dependency and regulatory context of the Malawian NGO sector.

## **CONCLUSION**

This review has examined literature linking management practices to project success among NGOs implementing donor-funded development

projects. The evidence indicates that structured project management practices, multi-level leadership capability, and stakeholder-oriented governance are consistently associated with improved project outcomes, while also revealing a significant contextual gap in Malawi-specific empirical evidence. Addressing this gap through systematic, context-sensitive research offers both theoretical contribution to NGO project management literature and practical value for donors, regulators, and local NGOs seeking to strengthen project delivery capacity in an increasingly constrained aid environment.

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