

COORDINATING THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY CHARACTERISTICS OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT FOR A SUCCESSFUL SHUTDOWN: A REVIEW OF IMO STATE PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION UNIT (PIU).

Uchenna Ebi, Ph.D., FNIVS, RSV
 Project Management Department
 Babcock University, Ilisan-Remo, Ogun State. Nigeria

Abstract:

Project management team, led by a project manager, consists of various professionals and consultants, contractors and artisans, all carrying out responsibilities in order to accomplish project tasks. A successful shutdown of a given project will depend, among other factors, on the project manager's ability to successfully coordinate the multidisciplinary characteristics of a given enterprise. This work examines the role of the Project Implementation Unit (PIU) in coordinating the project team to successful shutdown of the World Bank urban low-income housing project at Aba, Umuahia and Owerri towns. The work is an action research based on the author's participation all through the project life cycle as it affects the project unit. Flaws were identified in preference to use matrix organisation for such huge project, top management usurpation of opportunities and lack of knowledge of pure project management. Recommendations such as using pure project organisation, allowing project staff to complete assignment, sending the right personnel for training and solving the problem of agency tardiness were made.

Key words: implementation unit, project shutdown, multidisciplinary, coordination, matrix, project organisation.

1.0 Introduction.

Project Implementation Unit (PIU) implies not only a physical office but also the totality of the mission which will see to successful shutdown of the endeavour. The aim of establishing a PIU is to achieve good control of the particular project for which the unit was established. Coordination becomes easier. It contributes to better coordination of resources and improved communication (Hallin and Gustavsson, 2012).

Problem may arise from staffing, temporariness of assignments, double reporting nature and overzealousness of some project coordinators. But with good planning, execution, monitoring and control, project is bound to shut down successfully. Imo State Project Implementation Unit (PIU) is a good example of a project office. It was specifically set up for coordination of the World Bank Assisted Low Income Housing Project in the old Imo State (covering the towns of Owerri, Umuahia and Aba) in Nigeria.

The problem in setting up the PIU was that it was not totally pure project organisation, even as it was intended to be one. Management rested on both the PIU and Federal Mortgage Bank, and PIU staff were reporting both to the Project Director and their parent ministries.

While this research will identify the problems caused by the operations of the PIU, it is also necessary that answers to the following questions should be supplied:

- (i) Were project management principles applied in setting up the PIU?
- (ii) Was there adequate and proper coordination of project activities by PIU?
- (iii) Was there any attempt to adjust and harmonise activities as time went on during the implementation process?

It is necessary for the researcher to address what could be done in setting up such office in future should there be need for implementation of huge projects in order to avoid mistakes of the past.

2.0Case study: Project implementation unit for coordination of World Bank Assisted Low Income Project in old Imo State of Nigeria:

The old Imo State of Nigeria comprised what is now Imo and Abia States and the project was for Owerri (in Imo State) and Umuahia and Aba (in Abia State) but the PIU was established in Owerri, which was then in Imo State. The objectives of the project included provision of urban infrastructure and serviced plots in the three towns, provision of social amenities, generation of employment opportunities and advancement of recoverable loans for generation of owner-occupier houses. 3,650 plots were to be made available in Owerri and Aba towns while 1,500 would be introduced in Umuahia location.

The PIU applying the concept of unified multidisciplinary team was set up in 1980 with a Project Director (a town planner), one architect, two civil engineers, one estate surveyor and one community development officer.

The project director was a former chief town planning officer and was on secondment to PIU office. He was responsible for day-to-day administration of the PIU and was reporting to the permanent secretary and commissioner in the state ministry of works, transport and housing. He was also reporting to the World Bank, Federal Mortgage Bank of Nigeria and the Federal Ministry of Housing and Environment. His professional staff reported to him and also to their various bosses in their parent ministries or offices. An executive committee was set up to give guidance and support to the project director. Local committees were set up for each location to liaise with beneficiaries. Urban Development and Project Execution Committee (UDPEC) was also set up for the continuous monitoring, evaluation and coordination of project. Plot allocation committee, chaired by the commissioner for works, transport and housing, had members like commissioner for local government, representatives of ministry of finance, and commissioners for industries, education and health. The Federal Mortgage Bank of Nigeria (FMBN) was to give loans to plot beneficiaries and it was expected that 6,400 new low-income mortgages would be created between 1982 and 1986, while 8,285 low-income housing units would be created by 1988. While PIU was concerned more with whether beneficiaries were building on their allotted plots, the FMBN was also doing this and monitoring to see if beneficiaries were judiciously utilising disbursements made to them for the building construction. However, project could not take off until 1986, a delay (and of course, initial schedule overrun) of four years. By 1992, it was still running and PIU was still open (Ebi, U., 2015).

3.0Literature review.

Project implementation unit:

Project implementation unit is a gathering of skilled people whose contributions are coordinated by a project manager, who also manages a complex set of interfaces, for purposes of successful implementation of a given endeavour. There may be a core group of specialists assigned on the project team. They may often be assisted by professionals and consultants who work on specific segments of the project (Khana, 2011).

The head of the project implementation office who might be called project manager or project director is the one to skilfully lead the multidisciplinary, multifunctional team of managers, to accomplish the assigned mission (Chitkara, 2011). Though the project office contacts are made outside the organisation, monitoring and motivation roles are played by the project office. Resources are allocated to various needs of the project by the unit and management rests on the unit.

Matrix organization:

A matrix organisation is a network of intersections between a project team and the functional elements of an establishment (Cleland, 1983). It is a hybrid of traditional management and pure project management. It is a term used to describe the policy, procedure and work relationships resulting from

a superimposition of project terms on an existing hierarchical structure. While the hierarchical structure is rigid and predictable, the matrix structure is flexible and unpredictable (Ebi, 1991).

The matrix organisation is characterise by existence of a dual or multiple managerial accountability and responsibility. It has double or multiple command chains. While matrix comes with report to two superiors, traditional management organisation encourages reporting to a single superior. Matrix makes monitoring and control complex and cumbersome. Loyalty is also complex since a smart staff can gain from two-boss reporting system. However, shutdown is not traumatic in matrix organisation as it is in a pure project management. People in matrix are easily distributed to other functional department at project shutdown.

Concept of unified multidisciplinary team:

Project management is multidisciplinary in nature. A project team may comprise various professionals, consultants, contractors, middle level manpower, artisans and labourers. The success of a project is attributable to a large extent, successful handling of the multidisciplinary project team. A project manager should be able to enthuse and motivate the team and draw positive synergy from them (Khana, 2011).

Sometimes, a team is drawn from within an organisation where members may know each other. Other times, the team might be a mix of persons from within the organisation and outsiders. Each team, no matter how built, come with its own peculiar problem. It is the duty of the project manager to build a good and high performance team. The head of the project team should avoid processes that lead to organisational failure. Organisational failure occurs due to incorrect organisational structures resulting in conflicts, confusion of responsibility, inadequate delegation of authority at various levels, higher management interference, lack of stress on accountability and a tendency of people to escape responsibility by passing the bulk (Chitkara, 2011).

Among professionals involved in projects are project manager (director or leader) who might belong to any profession in the built environment (if construction project management), architect, quantity surveyor, civil, structural and electrical engineer, estate surveyor and valuer and contractors (main and sub). There are also numerous artisans and labourers at the site.

According to Informa Australia (2014) successful delivery of a project often requires professionals from a number of disciplines to work alongside each other. Mention was made of various advantages and disadvantages of works with multidisciplinary teams in projects. Benefits identified include better communication, efficient boost, time and cost saving and knowledge and skill sharing. Among the common challenges identified include logistic difficulties, confusion in command chains, differences in target identification and issues in accountability. It was suggested the effective training programmes and workshops could help bridge the gap. Also, definition of common goal, removal of communication barriers, whether cultural, geographical or structural, could also help.

Multidisciplinary project management and successful project shutdown:

Suncorp, a project management company, invested in development of Activity Based Costing (ABC), a blueprint towards using a multidisciplinary project management to ensure successful delivery of project. It involved use of project director/manager, change management stream leader, change management consultant and usual project staffing. The multidisciplinary team had business as usual (traditional management) team, technical model team, change management team and IT infrastructure management team which worked in combination and delivered the overall quality IT solution "in-full, on-time, under-budget, with strong business credibility" (Suncorp, 2014). A project is deemed successful if the shutdown is achieved with the barest budget, schedule and quality overruns. A budget may not succeed without good management of various multidisciplinary consultants/professionals involved in its execution.

4.0 Imo State World Bank housing multidisciplinary implementation unit and project outcome.

Success or failure of a project is judged also from its goal or set of goals, that is, for the purpose for which it is initiated. Among other things, it was intended that accommodation would be provided for 8,500 families with an improved infrastructure, sanitation, employment, improvement in rental and market values and improvement in health and education of beneficiaries. Project directly benefited 9,300 families through owner-occupation and tenancy, rental and market values of properties improved considerably, infrastructure, sanitation improved. All these came with serious and unpardonable quality, budget and schedule overruns. An estimated budget cost of \$44.7 million, was executed at a cost of over \$85 million. Taking schedule for instance, the start-up was delayed for three years (World Bank Report, 1994). A project estimated to run for three and half years, ran for more than 10 years, ending effectively in 1998, instead of 1988. Also, only a limited experience was gained through on-the-job training of entities involved. Sustainability of the project as it was planned did not materialise as Federal Mortgage Bank of Nigeria could not sustain the loan recovery success.

What portion of the failure is attributable to Project Implementation Unit and why?

Project director was the head of the PIU. His status was that of divisional head in his parent ministry. He was reporting to permanent secretary in the ministry as well as to the World Bank head in Nigeria. His project office (PIU) was located away from his parent ministry. He sat as the head of the plot allocation committee; he was also involved in contract documentation of public utilities and infrastructure. The PIU staff under him were in charge of monitoring of construction and settlement of squabbles among beneficiaries, on site. All coordination activities in regard to the project were referred to the PIU. His professional staff were in charge of plot demarcation (land surveyors), design and approval of all building plans (architects), participation in meetings with beneficiaries (community development offices), and making available technical assistance to beneficiaries. However, direct implementation of the project rested on both PIU and Federal Mortgage Bank of Nigeria (FMBN) and occasional intervention by World Bank office in Nigeria. This was a matrix arrangement and it could not have succeeded for such huge project. Pure project management would have been better. Most of the PIU staff were on secondment from parent ministries and loyalty was divided. Also, FMBN surveyors who were always on site for supervision were under the control of their branch managers and Area Office and Lagos bosses. Participating staff were frequently recalled to head office or parent ministry, thus disrupting work flow and the experience that went with it. Academic background in project management was lacking. The project director and those at the helm were not project management professionals. As such, management techniques like network analysis were not employed. Training opportunities for participating staff were usurped by high level bosses who came back only to discuss the procedure at local meetings rather than allow field staff to attend the training themselves.

The PIU operated a mechanistic line organisation approach with the “Ministry attitude” still on them. Files could spend days on one’s table rather than project organisation system where such file would be processed immediately on arrival. There were several buildings and other designs related to the project. There were land surveyor’s parcellation layout plan, town planner’s block layout design, architect’s building design and the engineer’s drawings. Differences were discovered in these designs. For example, land surveyor’s parcellation plan may indicate 1,000 plots whereas the town planner’s plan would show 1,200 plots for the area. These differences manifested themselves on ground during implementation. These designs could have been harmonised during plot allocation process on site before beneficiaries were given plot allocation documents.

5.0 Conclusion and recommendations:

Project Implementation Unit and Federal Mortgage Bank were the apex regulatory organs of the housing project implementation. They occupied a pivotal position in ensuring successful implementation of the project in question. A situation where some of their activities impaired work progress would have been avoided. As a remedy for such project in future, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- (i) To stem schedule slippages, implementation staff should keep eye on the schedule plan as is done in project units, rather than the ministry attitude exhibited by some staff.
- (ii) Network analysis should be employed for such projects whereby periodic reviews and analyses should be carried out to know when critical path is affected adversely and to know when schedule should be crashed. It is also important that floats should be utilised and resource levelling employed.
- (iii) For such projects in future, pure project management should be used and a qualified project manager used as the head of the PIU. Traditional management or matrix should not be used at all for such big projects.
- (iv) Cost overruns cannot be totally removed as these are due to inflation (external factor) sometimes. Measures to check such could include that the PIU should open a building materials centre for beneficiaries to purchase at low prices unaffected by huge profit margins collected by commercial sellers.
- (v) PIU should have quickly revoked land allocation of unserious allottees and reallocated same to those ready to build. Some beneficiaries who had their allocation in 1983 had not cleared their sites by 1989. Only two years grace was allowed in their title documents.
- (vi) The project staffing issues should not be allowed to hinder project work. Shortage of staff in the PIU and FMBN should not be tolerated. Staff training should be given to field staff, not office bosses. Retention of staff on the implementation team for major parts of the project period would have been better. Where it became necessary to move a staff before project shutdown, such staff should be allowed to train the incoming staff for at least six months before he takes over.
- (vii) The gap between activities of FMBN and PIU should be bridged through meetings and consultations.
- (viii) Hinging housing loan affordability on building value would have been a better way of assessing loan affordability rather than on income. Some of the beneficiaries could have declared inflated tax clearance certificates and FMBN had do way of finding out the true situation.
- (ix) A better communication level rather than the hierarchal barrier should be encouraged in such future projects. Project staff operate freely as a family not on servant-boss relationship.
- (x) Harmonisation of designs before plot allocation should be encouraged in future rather than depend on paper design.

However, for a project to be a success, adequate pre-investment analysis, good implementation planning and excellent implementation procedure among other things, must be put in place.

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