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Project Knowledge Management in A Social Development Project: A Case Study of Solid Waste Management Project in Dhaka City, Bangladesh

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This case study research examines the knowledge process of a social development assistance project.

A project, by definition, is a temporary endeavor implemented by a temporary team. Therefore, knowledge created in a project can be dispersed together with the dissolution of the team unless otherwise it is properly managed. This is also true in project-based organizations such as the World Bank and JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) involved in development assistance. Knowledge management activities of these organizations, however, mainly focus on storing and sharing of knowledge in their organizations and networks, but not reach out to each one of their projects. Although there is extensive literature covering inter-projects knowledge management in headquarters, a focus on intra-project knowledge management in a project appears to be very limited. With this background, this paper presents a theoretical model and practical implications for knowledge management in social development assistance projects.

The major research question is “how knowledge has been created, shared and utilized in Clean Dhaka Project?” Clean Dhaka Project (2007-2013) was the case of this study, which was an international cooperation project on solid waste management implemented by the collaboration of Dhaka city, Bangladesh and JICA. The author conducted one-month participatory observation of the project in 2013. Data were collected through document review, participatory observation, and interviews with stakeholders including project team members, local government officials, private sectors, and local residents. Qualitative data analysis was applied on these survey results using data analysis method of SCAT (Steps for Coding and Theorization).

Five major findings were made. First, the knowledge process of the project proceeded along with the orthodox Plan-Do-See cycle. Second, the first project plan was created mainly by the Japanese side with conventional means typically applied in developing countries. Third, although the project was stagnated by the problems unique to Dhaka city, the situation was overcome with some ideas originated in Japan but was customized to fit to the locality. Fourth, the project activities and their results were periodically reviewed, analyzed, and documented. Fifth, the project plan was updated incorporating the knowledge acquired in the previous phases.

As a theoretical implication, the author proposed a model of knowledge management in social development assistance projects. The model is named “PAR model,” a spiral process of three phases of *Planning*, *Acting*, and *Reflecting*. In the first Planning phase, the plan produced tends to be a decontextualized plan with insufficient local knowledge from the both sides of donor and recipient. In the following Acting phase, facing context specific problems, the project starts experimentation with local knowledge of both sides and muddles through the situations. In the Reflecting phase, the project integrates the knowledge created and extracts lessons learned for the next phase. In the Planning phase of the second cycle, the project plan is updated to be a more context-adaptive one. Thus, the model illustrates the evolution process of knowledge from the rationalistic but distant one to the incremental but context-adaptive one via the muddling through process.

As for practical implications, this study emphasizes the importance of the optimum recognition of the current status of the issues rather than making a highly sophisticated plan. The wide and deep recognition of the current status makes the project to be flexible and adaptable to the local context.

Finally, for future research, the author suggests more case studies to examine the validity of the PAR model in other fields, regions, and donor organizations.

Keywords: Knowledge Management, Project Management, Local Knowledge, Context-Adaptive