



Why Target Communities Remain Subjects Rather than Partners of Development Agencies in Integrated Conservation and Development Projects in Latin America

Louise Marie Busck-Lumholt^{1,5} · Esteve Corbera^{1,2,3} · Ole Mertz⁴

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Abstract

Despite repeated calls for locally anchored Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs), the decision-making authority of targeted Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) remains limited. This paper is grounded on an Institutional Logics perspective to examine the role of major development agencies—the World Bank (WB), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the German Development Bank (KfW)—in perpetuating this challenge. Interviews with project managers in the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region reveal complex internal hierarchies, risk-focus, high performance pressure, a “better than nothing” rationale, and a hands-off approach to community participation. We argue that these tendencies are rooted in organisational structure and individual mentalities that constitute a project management logic, which in turn raises concerns about the ability and willingness of development agencies to foster local project ownership of ICDPs. The paper calls for the international donor community to reflect on and transform such management logic, and to allocate more substantial decision-making power and resources to local representatives.

Keywords Institutional logic · International development · Development banks · Development agencies · Integrated conservation and development projects

✉ Louise Marie Busck-Lumholt
lob.si@cbs.dk

- ¹ Institute of Environmental Science and Technology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain
- ² Department of Geography, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain
- ³ Institució Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats (ICREA), Barcelona, Spain
- ⁴ Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark
- ⁵ Department of Strategy and Innovation (SI), Copenhagen Business School, Kilevej 14A, 2000 Frederiksberg, Copenhagen, Denmark



Résumé

Malgré les appels répétés pour des Projets Intégrés de Conservation et de Développement (en anglais, “Integrated Conservation and Development Projects”, ICDPs) ancrés localement, l’autorité décisionnelle des Peuples Autochtones et des Communautés Locales (en anglais, “Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities”, IPLCs) ciblés reste limitée. Ce document est basé sur une perspective de Logiques Institutionnelles pour examiner le rôle des principales agences de développement—la Banque Mondiale (BM), l’Agence des États-Unis pour le Développement International (USAID), la Banque Interaméricaine de Développement (BID), et la Banque Allemande de Développement (KfW)—dans la perpétuation de ce défi. Des entretiens avec des chefs de projet dans la région Amérique Latine et Caraïbes (ALC) révèlent des hiérarchies internes complexes, un focus sur le risque, une forte pression de performance, une logique de “mieux que rien”, et une approche détachée de la participation communautaire. Nous soutenons que ces problèmes sont enracinés dans la structure organisationnelle et les mentalités individuelles qui constituent une logique de gestion de projet, qui à son tour soulève des préoccupations quant à la capacité et la volonté des agences de développement à favoriser l’appropriation locale des ICDPs. Le document appelle la communauté internationale des donateurs à réfléchir sur et à transformer une telle logique de gestion, et à attribuer plus de pouvoir décisionnel substantiel et de ressources aux représentants locaux.

Resumen

A pesar de los repetidos llamados a Proyectos Integrados de Conservación y Desarrollo (en inglés, “Integrated Conservation and Development Projects”, ICDPs) localmente anclados, la autoridad de toma de decisiones de los Pueblos Indígenas y Comunidades Locales (en inglés, “Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities”, IPLCs) objetivo sigue siendo limitada. Este documento se basa en una perspectiva de Lógicas Institucionales para examinar el papel de las principales agencias de desarrollo—el Banco Mundial (BM), la Agencia de los Estados Unidos para el Desarrollo Internacional (USAID), el Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (BID), y el Banco Alemán de Desarrollo (KfW)—en perpetuar este desafío. Las entrevistas con los gerentes de proyectos en la región de América Latina y el Caribe (ALC) revelan complejas jerarquías internas, enfoque en riesgos, alta presión de rendimiento, una lógica de “mejor que nada”, y un enfoque de no intervención en la participación comunitaria. Sostenemos que estos problemas están arraigados en la estructura organizativa y en las mentalidades individuales que constituyen una lógica de gestión de proyectos, que a su vez plantea preocupaciones sobre la capacidad y la voluntad de las agencias de desarrollo para fomentar la propiedad local de los ICDPs. El documento pide a la comunidad internacional de donantes que reflexione y transforme dicha lógica de gestión, y que asigne un poder de toma de decisiones y recursos más sustanciales a los representantes locales.



Introduction

Since the 1980s, funding for biodiversity conservation and integrated initiatives has significantly increased. These initiatives, also known as Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs), seek to integrate environmental and developmental objectives. Despite receiving over two-thirds of biodiversity-related donor aid from 1980 to 2008 (Miller 2014), ICDPs have faced persistent criticism for their conflicting objectives, ambivalent outcomes, and inevitable tradeoffs between conservation and development (Sandker et al. 2009; Salafsky 2011; Bauch et al. 2014; Catalano et al. 2019).

Simultaneously, it has been observed that Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) receive a minimal share of this funding when it is directed through international NGOs, and bilateral and multilateral organizations (Rainforest Foundation Norway 2021). Moreover, research in community-driven development consistently emphasizes that the involvement of IPLCs in international projects is often confined to 'participation invitations' during the implementation phase, with their role typically being absent or marginal in project design and evaluation (Aguilar-Støen and Hirsch 2017; Pham 2018; Gugerty et al. 2021; Busck-Lumholt et al. 2022; Saguin 2018). This issue is not novel but regrettably persists on a widespread scale. Its continued significance is underscored by evidence demonstrating that the prevalence of external decision-making creates implementation discontinuities when development funding stops (Dyer et al. 2014; Evely et al. 2011) and reduces the likelihood of local commitment which is often decisive for project sustainability and impact (Dawson et al. 2021; Mansuri and Rao 2013).

This paper investigates the persistence of participation issues by exploring the perspectives of project managers in international development agencies on engagement with IPLCs across stages of ICDP design and implementation. NGOs, bilateral institutions, and multilateral agencies are crucial in promoting participatory sustainable development through development assistance and management frameworks (Martens 2002). Their accountability to target communities is vital for the effectiveness and perceived fairness of development projects (Winters 2010). Moreover, recent evidence on ICDP funding shows that allocation is influenced not only by development and conservation needs but also by the governance and political-economic factors shaping the relationship between development agencies and aid recipients (Reed et al. 2020).

It has been demonstrated that development agencies receive positive evaluation results from projects with local beneficiary participation, while the involvement of recipient governments can have a negative effect on project outcomes (Kim et al. 2020). Existing literature shows how international development agencies often engage in vague and blurry accountability structures (Martens 2002; Kim et al. 2020; Mcgee 2013) while being able to influence domestic policy and conservation strategies through various formal and informal pathways (Bernstein and Cashore 2012; Burns et al. 2016; Cashore and Stone 2012; Wibowo 2015; Gale and Cadman 2013). Bernstein and Cashore (2012) discern between four



pathways[(1) rules, (2) norms and discourse, (3) markets, (4) direct access to policy processes] and apply these to analyse how domestic or firm policies are influenced by actors and institutions in the case of forest governance. However, little is still known about which mechanisms guide, influence, and shape collaboration between project managers and IPLCs [for exceptions see Waisbord (2008)].

We apply the framework of institutional logics (Friedland and Alford 1991) to disentangle structural and underlying causes behind limited project collaboration between international development agencies and the targeted IPLCs. Interviews conducted by the first author with experts and project managers from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the German Development Bank (KfW), the World Bank (WB), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) working with ICDPs in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) constitute our main data source. The interviewees are professionally situated in a ‘middle’ position in their respective organizations, where decisions are shaped by a top-down system, while they oversee third-party actors in participatory implementation. This unique vantage point allows us to shed light on how the interplay between individual mentalities and organizational structure contributes to the formation of a project management logic that impedes a full departure from the remnants of patron-client relationships with local beneficiaries. These agencies were chosen because they represent the top sources of aid and loans related to general environmental protection in Latin America (d-portal 2021). Our enquiry is motivated by a curiosity regarding the role and responsibility of development agencies and driven by a concern that project procedures will continue to render limited local ownership (Corbera et al. 2020; Saguin 2018) as long as local participation is defined by external actors (Telleria 2021) and decision-making is kept at higher management levels (Aguilar-Støen 2017; Busck-Lumholt et al. 2022; Hughes et al. 2009).

An Institutional Logics Framework

Institutional logic, rooted in sociology and organization theory, is a dynamic framework for analysing the institutional behaviour of organizations or individuals. Thornton and Ocasio (1999, p. 804) define it as “the socially constructed historical patterns of cultural symbols and material practices, assumptions, values, and beliefs by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their daily activity.” In essence, institutional logics are embodied in practices and reproduced by cultural assumptions and political struggles. Centring on the diversity of cultural meaning within and across institutional orders, institutional logic emerged as an alternative to the proliferation of institutional isomorphism and diffusion studies (Thornton et al. 2008). It offers a conceptual framework to understand how belief systems, values, norms, and symbols shape social reality and affect social, economic, and political relations (Thornton and Ocasio 1999).

Researchers deploying an institutional logic approach seek to comprehend how the distinct culture and values of organizations or social groups influence decisions,



strategies, and interactions with their environment. Friedland and Alford (1991) highlight capitalism, state bureaucracy, families, religion, and political democracy as contending logics with differing practices and beliefs, shaping individuals' engagement in political struggles. Besharov and Smith (2014) offer an analytical framework to understand the diverse implications of such logic multiplicity within and between institutions. For these authors, institutional logics both constrain and enable individual behaviour, shaping individuals, organizations, and society within a given cultural context.

In environmental and development studies, literature on institutional logics is limited but consistently recognized for its relevance. Hathaway and Askvik (2021) present a typology of four institutional logics to illustrate how different sets of social practices guide public accountability organizations in Zambia. Others explore how actors strategically utilize institutional logics to influence social behaviour and organizational structure. Venkataraman et al. (2016) demonstrate this by showcasing an NGO in Northern India employing market and community logics to enhance rural livelihoods. Osei-Amponsah et al. (2018) show how value chain actors in Ghana navigate multiple logics based on individual interests and power dynamics, while Høiland and Klemsdal (2022) examine professional work, highlighting the varied roles of institutional logics across organizational levels. Relevant to this research, Gugerty et al. (2021) and Skelcher and Smith (2014) emphasize the complexity, diversity, and hybrid nature of institutional logics within development institutions. By being able to reconcile contradictory logics (Friedland and Alford 1991), actors can effectively navigate within existing institutional frameworks while also contributing to their transformation over time. This dynamic process enables both continuity and change within institutions, offering solutions to the tension between structure and agency in institutional theories.

Inspired by these works, we show why institutional logic is meaningful to the context of development agencies and project managers' position in ICDPs. Rather than identifying sets of complementary or competing logics, as has been the focus of much literature in the field (Høiland and Klemsdal 2022; Osei-Amponsah et al. 2018; Venkataraman et al. 2016), our analysis focuses on the specific conditions that govern the everyday practice of many staff in the development agencies and that we suggest constitute a project management logic. Our objective is to see whether specific aspects of such logic can help explain the persisting tendency among development agencies to avoid direct collaboration with target communities. Inspired by Hathaway and Askvik (2021), we focus on both practical and personal dimensions within the realms of organizational structure and individual mentalities to characterise the agencies' project management logic. In doing so, we operationalize the concept of institutional logic in a manner that encompasses the broader social world, incorporating informal aspects of social organization and individual agency (Skelcher and Smith 2014; Johansen and Waldorff 2017) (Fig. 1).

The realm of organizational structure in the institutional logic encompasses working conditions, standards and regulations, and the distribution of roles and responsibilities within an organization (Supplementary materials_1). We argue that without a supportive organizational structure for direct engagement with target communities throughout the project cycle, combined with project managers



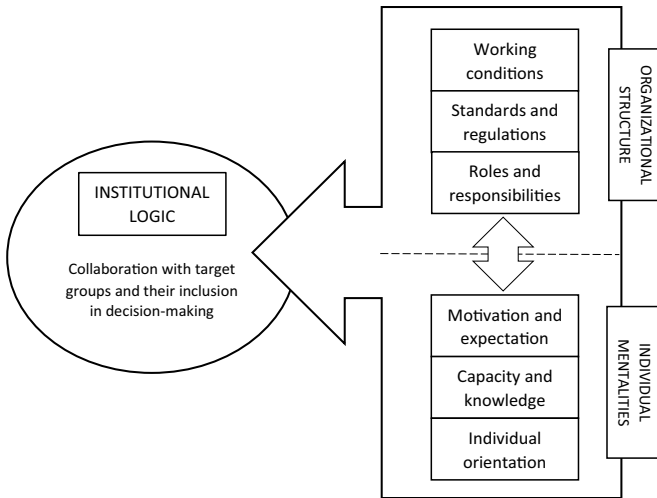


Fig. 1 The project management institutional logic as a constellation of organizational structure and individual mentalities

not recognizing this responsibility and lacking financial or other incentives for proactive involvement, it becomes unlikely for the development agency to foster an institutional ethos of collaboration (Flint and Natrup 2014).

Regarding *working conditions*, we focus on the time and resources allocated to meet project deadlines, the flexibility granted to project managers, and the characteristics of the workplace. *Standards and regulations guidelines* refer to project guidelines and policy frameworks of development agencies, which by expressing certain norms can represent institutional logic (Gugerty et al. 2021). The distribution of *roles and responsibilities* mediates the project management logic because it contributes to explaining the relationships and accountability structures between project stakeholders as well as the difference in interaction with target communities versus other project stakeholders. Anticipated roles may be specific, concerning project partners, or influenced by broader discourses (Scholz et al. 2014), such as the conceptualization of “IPLCs”.

The realm of individual mentalities in the institutional logic encompasses capacity and knowledge, motivation and expectations, and individual orientation of organizational members (Supplementary materials_1). Analysing these is crucial, as ‘incentives and constraints for individual agents can diverge significantly from those of the organisation that they work for’ (Martens 2002). The *capacity and knowledge* of individuals play a pivotal role in shaping their approach to project tasks and their collaboration with project stakeholders, including target communities. Even if considered a core responsibility, the task of guiding implementing partners on how to include and engage target communities in decision-making processes requires capacity related to participation strategies and knowledge of the local context. Cognitive capacity limitations, for instance, can surface when project managers with backgrounds in environmental economics are required to consider social and psychological



aspects of rural development in a project design (Lynam et al. 2012). Nevertheless, we recognize that prioritizing capacity building and knowledge on participation strategies does not automatically foster a more collaborative individual mentality or result in more participatory projects. In cases where capacity and knowledge become a technocratic agenda, quantitative measures and accuracy could take precedence over the more intricate and socially sensitive aspects. In fact, this pursuit of accuracy is often associated with rule-based knowledge structures and processing that often hinder local participation (Lynam et al. 2012; Chaiken et al. 1996).

Motivation and expectations and *individual orientation* produce information on attitudes and more unconscious levels of reasoning. These components of individual mentalities have been central in early mental model research (Craik 1943; Norman 1983; Johnson-Laird 1983), more recent research on institutional change and natural resource management (Lynam et al. 2012; Scholz et al. 2014; D'Armengol et al. 2021), and have been proposed to support the analysis of institutional logic (Reay and Jones 2016). In the context of a project management logic, we assume that low expectations concerning local capacities, for instance, may lead to a preference for one-way training sessions rather than fostering mutual collaboration. The motivation of project managers, or the absence thereof, is influenced by individual orientation. Consequently, both motivation and expectations are intricately tied to individual orientation, and collectively, these variables mediate the normative aspects of the institutional logic. By individual orientation, we refer here to an individual's political, economic, social, and career preferences, which uniquely shape how capacity and knowledge are employed and the perception of variables within the organisational structure.

Figure 1, detailed in supplementary materials_1, illustrates the mutual influence among these variables that either change or reproduce the institutional logic (Thornton et al. 2015). Complex connections arise from overlapping themes; for example, the individual capacity of project managers for local collaboration depends on working conditions, roles, and responsibilities. Likewise, how individuals navigate within the organizational structure is influenced by individual capacities, orientation, motivation, and expectation (Santy et al. 2022).

As we demonstrate in the remainder of this article, exploring these aspects within organisational structure and individual mentalities provides a more nuanced understanding of why development agencies refrain from engaging directly in collaboration with local beneficiaries. At the organisational level, we illuminate the broader institutional context and shared culture shaping agencies' collective identity and operations. On an individual level, we make evident the unique perspectives, values, and experiences of agency staff, showcasing how their interpretations and actions influence and are influenced by project management logic. Our research can serve as a reference for development agencies to reconsider such project practices and be more conscious of the social implications of their project management logic.



Methods

Case Study: Four Development Agencies

This paper is primarily based on interviews conducted with project managers affiliated with WB, KfW, USAID, and IDB. Despite the diversity in organizational structure, purpose, membership, and interactions with national governments, these agencies share a common role as supervising partners within a project management framework for local implementing organizations and beneficiaries. The research specifically targets project managers responsible for overseeing and allocating project management tasks within the development agency's institutional structure.

The WB is the largest multilateral development bank worldwide, headquartered in Washington DC, USA, with over 180 global offices. It provides loans, guarantees, and advisory services to middle- and low-income countries (worldbank.org). The IDB, also a multilateral development bank, is based in Washington DC and operates with country representation offices in Latin America. The size of these offices depends on project portfolios, ranging from one project manager in some countries to four in Mexico, which has the largest portfolio (iadb.org). KfW is a bilateral development bank headquartered in Frankfurt, Germany, operating through two main financial instruments: the bank's resources and public budget resources from German taxpayers (KfW.org). It offers concessional finance, concessional credits, and grants. While it has around 500 employees in Frankfurt, it has approximately 75 offices outside Germany, with less extensive country representation compared to IDB and the WB. In contrast, USAID is a bilateral aid agency managing public funding, subject to both U.S. and beneficiary country policies. Bilateral agencies like USAID and KfW often have smaller country representation but greater flexibility in management, roles, and responsibilities.

From here onwards, we use the term *development agencies* as a coined term for these four agencies as they all guide the implementation of development initiatives worldwide. Regarding interviewees, we use the term *project managers* to refer to individuals within development agencies who fulfil a project management role, actively participating in both project design and implementation processes. Finally, we refer to the diverse indigenous and local communities involved in development interventions as *target groups*, a term commonly used by development agencies and employed here for analytical purposes.

Data Collection

We contacted staff from the WB, USAID, KfW, and IDB involved in ongoing programmes and projects with a dual conservation and development focus. Projects were identified on agency websites and selected based on three criteria: (1) minimum commitment of 10 million USD, (2) approval before 2021, and



(3) categorization under environmental protection, rural livelihoods, and development topics. Regional programmes and those primarily focussed on sustainable natural resource management (rather than biodiversity conservation) were excluded from the sample.

The WB has a comprehensive project database and data availability. Projects were identified by searching within the portfolio of active projects of each country in LAC by a filter of two themes, 'environment and natural resource management' and 'urban and rural development'. The LAC region was chosen since it has a high number of project activities which increases the sampling feasibility and provides a geographical focus for potential comparison in future research. This search yielded 19 projects of which all but one project manager¹ were contacted via email. While it was challenging to obtain the email addresses of entire project teams, the email was received positively by eight of the 18 projects and portfolio managers invited for an interview. For KfW, there was limited project information on the web page and after having reached the manager of the LAC portfolio, the contact with project managers in the region was based on snowballing. Four KfW employees responded positively to the interview query. USAID was like KfW in terms of limited access to project overview and contact information on USAID staff was not available on the agency's project information webpage. Through general internet searches, portfolio managers from Honduras, Mexico, and Colombia were reached and interviewed. Finally, IDB projects were sampled by country (one search for each LAC country); by topic (Agriculture and rural development/environment and natural disasters / sustainable tourism); by implementation status; and by keywords in the title and description of the project objective (rural conservation and development component). This filtering yielded 44 projects of which approximately 2/3 were contacted but only one project portfolio manager agreed to be interviewed.

This data collection processes resulted in a primary data set consisting of 18 interviews conducted with individuals managing projects that have been either implemented or under implementation between 2018 and 2021. Of the interviewees, two are technical staff and 16 are project managers. Five of the project managers were based primarily in headquarters, while the rest were working from country offices across the LAC region. These in-depth interviews were supplemented by 11 expert interviews with consultants and specialists from WB (7), FAO (1), USAID (1), IICA (1) and the University of Illinois (1). All interviews² were conducted by the first author via an online teleconference platform. The interviewees included an equal distribution of female and male participants. Among them, 15 were trained in environmental science, 6 had a combination of environmental science and economics background, 3 had social studies or development studies background, and 5 had economics, law, or business administration background. In-depth interviews were strategically focussed on eliciting insights pertaining to

¹ The project was already analysed by the first author and presented in Busck-Lumholt (2022, in review).

² Interviews are assigned the following codes: 16 interviewees with project managers (KfW1-4; WB1-6;WB12; USAID1-3; IDB1), 2 interviews with consultants and technical staff from selected projects (WBSP1-2), and 11 expert interviews (WBSP3-6; WB7-11; USAID1; FAO1).



the institutional logic dimensions outlined in Fig. 1. Each interview was recorded, transcribed, and analysed using a qualitative content analytical framework. Our data collection challenges in accessing interviewees led to an overrepresentation of WB participants. This is also partly due to the size of their project teams ranging from 15 to 30, in contrast to organizations like KfW, which typically has smaller teams of one to four people.

We do not analyse institutional variations at the national level or among diverse individuals, organizations, and projects. Interviewing project managers from smaller projects in different regions could provide complementing insights. Recognizing that this limits the study's capacity to make generalized statements about the role of development agencies, our contribution focuses on delineating the characteristics of the prevailing project management institutional logic among the interviewed project managers. We assume that if a consistent logic emerges across various project managers, projects, countries, and organizations, it likely forms part of a broader discourse within the development machinery.

Data Analysis

We qualitatively captured patterns of institutional logic (Reay and Jones 2016; Friedland and Alford 1991) through analysis of individual interviews. To provide context to the insights derived from individual interviews, we reviewed project contracts with national governments, aiming to better understand the distribution of decision-making power within projects (Honig 2020). Additionally, we examined agencies' environmental and social frameworks³ using Nvivo software. This process involved identifying word frequencies and co-occurrences related to project management and participation, guided by the topics outlined in Table 1.

Insights from documents and individual interview transcriptions were produced through a qualitative content analytical approach (Fig. 2). As the primary data set, the interview transcriptions were examined in detail, particularly focussing on statements related to so-called beneficiaries, participation, and decision-making processes. The employment of consistent coding categories (Table 1) facilitated the comparison and assessment of alignment or contradictions between ideals, structures, and individual perceptions. This approach allowed for an exploration of how institutional logic manifests at both organizational and individual levels. The elicitation of institutional logic was thus accomplished indirectly (Jones et al. 2011). Coded text segments were labelled based on their conceptual relevance to the institutional logic framework, including knowledge structures (associative and rule-based), individual orientation, motivation, and capacity. The complete coding

³ These include the Environmental and Social Policy Framework (IDB 2020); Sustainability Guideline Assessment and management of Environmental, Social, and Climate Aspects: Principles and Procedures (KfW SG 2023); ADS Chapter 597 Operations Performance Policy (USAID 2015); Policy on Promoting the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (USAID 2020); Environmental and Natural Resource Management Framework (USAID); the World Bank Environmental and Social Management Framework (World Bank 2017).



Table 1 Predefined coding categories guiding content analysis

Coding category	Description
Beneficiary target group	General statements on characteristics of project beneficiaries including local communities as a whole, indigenous peoples as a group or any specific sub-groups within them
IPLC decision-making on activity selection and design	Statements regarding the ideal and/or de facto allocation of decision-making power to IPLC beneficiaries regarding project activity selection and design
IPLC decision-making on activity implementation	Statements regarding the ideal and/or de facto allocation of decision-making power to IPLC beneficiaries regarding project implementation
IPLC decision-making on monitoring and evaluation approach	Statements regarding the ideal and/or de facto allocation of decision-making power to IPLC beneficiaries regarding project monitoring and evaluation approach
Participation tools	Prioritized tools for including IPLCs in project management
Channels for beneficiary decision-making and feedback	Description of channels in the project system for IPLCs to provide feedback across the project cycle and suggest alternative activities
Donor management responsibility and control	Statements regarding the opinion on and feeling of responsibility and control of project cycle, specifically with regards to IPLC beneficiaries
Donor priorities input	Statements regarding project input activities such as budgets and personnel
Donor priorities output	Statements regarding project output in terms of results and M&E focus

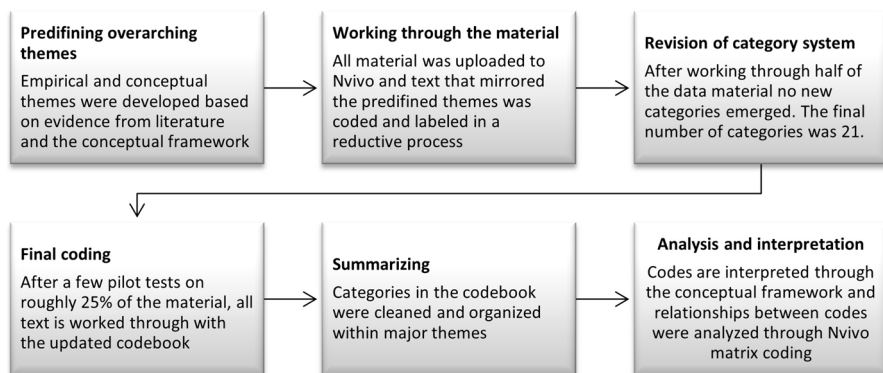


Fig. 2 Content analysis of qualitative data

hierarchy, along with the referenced data files and coded content, can be found in the supplementary materials.

Results

The following two sub-sections provide evidence of the six analytical dimensions of the project management logic. The first presents shared and distinctive features of the development agencies' organisational structure including working conditions, standards and regulations, and roles and responsibilities. The second unwraps the individual mentalities of project managers as they navigate this structure, including capacity and knowledge, motivation and expectations, and individual orientation.

Shared and Distinctive Features of the Development Agencies' Organizational Structure

Across the four agencies, a high level of managerial complexity is a common trait within their otherwise diverse organisational structures. This complexity seems to arise partly from the numerous internal standards and regulations. The WB standards and regulations emerge as the most widely adopted and influential, promoting international best practices that officially endorse inclusive and participatory projects. A stated participation standard in their Environmental and Social Framework (ESF) is to ensure that target groups are *'fully consulted about, and have opportunities to actively participate in, project design and the determination of project implementation arrangements'* (ESF Guidance Note 2018). Detailed internal standards on local participation within USAID and KfW have not been identified. USAID aligns its practices with U.S. foreign policy, while KfW adheres to the WB standards (KfW4) and own Sustainability Guidelines (KfW SG 2023) where meaningful participation is conceptualized as a *'process that allows affected people and interested stakeholders to express their views and concerns'* fW SG 2023. The IDB⁴ appears to also adopt WB standards, incorporating much of their wording into their strategies (IDB ESF 2020). Regarding participation, the focus is on acknowledging rights, and social safeguards, as well as ensuring participation in project benefits when possible (IDB 2020).

While individual mentalities among project managers surely hold great nuances (as will be elaborated in the following section), it is noteworthy how prompt interviewees refer to social safeguards and Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) when asked about their view on local beneficiaries' role in ICDPs (IDB1; KfW2; WB2; WB4; WB5; WB6; WBSP2; WB9). The scope and scale of consultation are described as proportionate to anticipated risks in the project as in the World Bank's ESF Guidance Note 2018. This suggests that local communities' involvement in ICDPs is perceived more as a measure of risk management and standards compliance

⁴ In 2023, IDB began to prepare a new institutional strategy (idb.org).



at specific project stages rather than an integral component of management across the project cycle. A similar inclination emerged in responses to what space is left in the project management position for interaction with local beneficiaries, mentioning community visits, and the establishment of grievance mechanisms (IDB1; WB6; WB10; WB11), solicitation processes (USAID3), social safeguards (WB5; WB12), and legal agreements on consultations (KfW2).

Several interviewees describe participation as consultations and information sharing rather than as an exercise of priority setting across project equals (IDB1; KfW2; USAID1; WBSP2). The specifics on how to operationalise participation in a project management context beyond social safeguards remain somewhat elusive. This is likely tied to the overarching emphasis on client ownership of projects and a hands-off approach among development agencies to project design and implementation, as also reflected in the WB ESF (2016). Nonetheless, projects are often informally labelled as 'IDB projects' or 'WB projects' (USAIDSP1; FAO1; WBSP1; WBSP2). This is partly due to the funding and partly due to the knowledge and technical assistance provided by these agencies during project design (FAO1).

Another common trait is that the development agencies portray the aid- or loan-receiving national government as the beneficiary project partner, and target groups as project beneficiaries and thus not a project partner (IDB ESF 2020; KfW SG 2023; USAID ENRM; USAID SE 2018; WB ESF 2016). Standards for local participation are described as dependent on the assessment of vulnerability, risk, and expected impact (IDB ESF 2020; KfW SG 2023; USAID SE 2018; WB ESF 2016). In IDB, WB, and KfW, IPLCs are labelled as vulnerable, with standards and regulations expressing the logic that their vulnerability necessitates consultation measures to mitigate the risk of negative impacts (IDB ESF 2020; KfW SG 2023; WB ESF 2016). The term 'collaboration' is applied to project partners, but not to target communities, which are rather associated with socioeconomic needs, service delivery, and participation in 'behavioural change' and 'capacity building' (WB2-6; USAID1-3; KfW1-3).

The agencies are characterized by distinct project team structures. KfW projects can have teams ranging from one to four people, while WB projects typically have larger teams of 15 to 30 individuals, including technical staff, consultants, and project managers. Project managers across agencies typically oversee multiple projects based at either agency headquarters or the country of implementation. In the WB, there is an unofficial rotation rule that limits project managers' stay in a country to a maximum of four years, officially to maintain objectivity and foster career development in a dynamic working environment with continuous knowledge exchange. Conversely, some KfW project managers have served in the same country office for over a decade. This is seen as a unique and positive characteristic of their organizational structure: *'When you have lived in a country for four years, you can pass on some things, but you cannot transmit your experience to the next manager'* (KfW1). Overseeing projects from a country office usually carries the additional responsibility for engaging in social events and fostering positive relationships with government officials and other external stakeholders (WB7; WB10; KfW1; USAID2; KfW2).



To varying extents, the four agencies display a hierarchical and bureaucratic structure, with primary decision-makers predominantly situated at headquarters. The complexity of operational and internal guidelines necessitates extensive documentation that prolongs project preparation and contract negotiations. Project-specific procedures are outlined in the contract between the development agency and the implementing agency. Typically, target group representatives are invited to partake in consultation or FPIC at the stage when the aid or loan-receiving government requests the implementing agency to discuss and negotiate project activities in more detail. Until then, target groups have often not yet been identified and can also change in later states due to shifting political priorities (WB2; IDB1).

These working conditions naturally vary across agencies. However, there are notable commonalities in how project managers describe them. This includes overarching responsibility to navigate time constraints and consistently deliver measurable results. For example, all interviewees underscored the challenges of addressing the diversity of development issues, while consistently facing impending deadlines, overrun schedules, and demands from project stakeholders.

In the multilateral agencies, extensive project portfolios, loans, and teams coexist with the prevalent use of short-term consultants overseeing social and environmental compliance (WB1-6; WBSP1-2; IDB1). With few exceptions (WB2), interviewees confirmed project managers' dedication to their agencies' formal objectives but voiced concerns over internal pressures for rapid results and extensive reporting. While recognizing the importance of interacting with local beneficiaries, it is not viewed as an integral aspect of a project manager's role or responsibility.

Bilateral agencies feature comparable large-scale projects but smaller portfolios. Project teams are more compact, yet there appears to be more frequent interaction with local beneficiaries. In such cases, interviewees note a great degree of discretion as the bureaucracy is limited to specific project phases and tasks (KfW1-4; USAID1-3). While interviewees from the WB are risk-averse and concerned about international reputation (WB4-5; WB7; WB9; WB12), interviewees from the bilateral agencies appear to have a more critical perspective on the structure of development agencies and internal hierarchies. For example, a KfW staffer noted,

When we (local staff) have those gatherings (in Frankfurt) it is like the tribal gatherings of the underdogs, and everybody just complains and complains and complains and complains. We are all like, 'we are not stupid. We know who we are, and we know we are minions in this world but that does not make us stupid'. We see things and we have opinions. It is just that nobody ever asks them (KfW3).

The project structure itself is rather streamlined across the agencies. As noted by an interviewee, development agencies have substantial funds available, and projects need to quickly demonstrate an effective use of such funds. Therefore, a five-year project term is commonly sought, irrespective of the type of intervention. To this, an interviewee elaborated that,



(as a project manager) you cannot do much if the rules above you are those. I think (as) international cooperation we need to think about it and say, "We might not be doing this correctly." We've worked a lot in the forest, for example, and there's no possible project that you will have that in five years will be completed. It is a forest. It just takes longer (USAID3).

This time-management challenge becomes even more acute during changing counterpart governments, which may result in new target areas and implementing teams who have distinct priorities regarding development priorities and community participation (WBSP2; USAIDSP1).

The Individual Mentalities of Project Managers

The way the project management logic manifests in an organisational structure also depends on the individual mentalities of project managers. This is evident when personalities emerge as a key determinant in fostering strong relationships with project stakeholders (KfW1; USAID2; WB2; WBSP1; WB12). In essence, project procedures, prioritization of site visits, and processes of stakeholder and beneficiary collaboration are likely shaped by individual personality and experience (USAID2-3; WB2,6-8,10-12; WBSP2,6; KfW3). While some stress the significance of close community engagement (USAID3; WB1; KfW2), others view participation and community dialogue as an internal matter between the client and the community (KfW4).

There seems to be a dynamic between the organisational structure and project managers' motivations and expectations for community participation. A 'better than nothing' rationale surfaces, acknowledging the inevitable tradeoffs between delivering results and the quality of participation (USAID2; WB2; WB10). Interviewees emphasized the importance of maintaining a focus on achieving results, attaining higher-level goals, and creating large-scale impact, even in cases where baseline studies are missing and local participation is poor (WB2; WB4; USAID2; KfW2). As put by a KfW employee, *'I don't know... Would you rather lose the funds than use data that you know is not the best but it's some data or... you know what I'm saying?'* (KfW3).

Local presence is described either in relation to standards and regulations or as an occasional activity adding value for project managers through 'eye-opening' experiences that generate new knowledge, aesthetic pleasure, and motivation (WB10; KfW4). This sentiment does not necessarily indicate a lack of awareness. On the contrary, several interviewees were very articulate about challenges with participatory decision-making. One project manager argued poor participation is a structural issue but also an inevitable premise that cannot, and maybe should not, be controlled by development agencies (USAID3). As put by a WB project manager, *'I wouldn't say it's our role to really control there. (...) we function based on trusting that we know who our counterparts are. We trust in their interest, objectives and motivation'* (WB1).



Simultaneously, interviewees hint at an authoritative approach to defining higher-level objectives, including partner selection, target areas, sectors, and desired outcomes (e.g. forest conservation, infrastructure, health). While the strategy and extent of local involvement vary across projects, significant decisions are typically negotiated among the implementing partner, national government, and the development agency which assumes a supervisory role (WB1; WB11; WB7; WB12). Representatives from target groups are more likely involved in subsequent smaller decisions related to the implementation of project activities (IDB1; KfW2-4; USAID1-3; WB1-2,6; WBSP1-2). The contracted counterparts are perceived to hold the needed trust and capacity for local interaction, as a USAID staffer emphasized:

they (contracted counterparts) likely have 20, 30, 10 years of experience working with the locals. I think that this is why we use them the most because they are the ones that have the connection. Particularly working with development, it is not easy to create that trust with the producers and the local people just in one second. (..) if we started a landscape (project) tomorrow, nobody would work with us (USAID3).

Simultaneously, other interviewees emphasized that the responsibility of the development agency to closely monitor and interact with the implementing counterpart is directly proportionate to their performance and level of capacity (WB3-4; WBSP2). Rather than allocating the responsibility internally, project managers typically opt to bring in external consultants to ensure that social and environmental standards are met (WB12). According to most of the interviewees, the capacity of project managers is tailored to provide supervision and technical support, and to engage in diplomatic negotiations on design based on agency standards and recipient government priorities (IDB1; WB5; WB12; KfW2; KfW1; USAID1).

Project managers' motivation for working with ICDPs is more linked to international policy frameworks and individual career goals (KfW2-3; WB2; WB4; USAID2). Considering that crucial indicators for measuring project success include quick results, fund disbursement, and standards compliance (USAIDSP1; WBSP3-5), and the primary contribution of development agencies to project outcomes can be seen as the provision of knowledge and technical expertise (WB8), it makes sense for project managers and their superiors to prioritize this capacity over learning from and with local communities. However reasonable such logic might appear from the perspective of development agencies, related statements on the notion of IPLCs as groups in need of help through projects, come to mirror a patron–client relationship:

The problem is how to implement when you have rules they need to understand. One of the major things was to open accounts in every community. You have to have a treasurer, amongst others. (..) They barely had a phone. Not a smartphone, and you have to open an account. They never had an account before. They did not know what a password was. (..)



Now (because of the project) they understand a bit more what a bank is, and they are less afraid to go to the bank and deposit their money (WB2).

In addition, interviewees made extensive use of participation buzzwords and some more anachronistic expressions such as coining project offices as ‘missions’ (USAID, IDB) or project activities (WB, KfW). Meanwhile, a few interviewees were attentive to power imbalances and to the tendency to victimize rather than empower target groups (KfW1; KfW3). As put by a project manager reflecting on the connotations of the development rhetoric *‘The development talk is very colonial. We still talk about missions. Like “We are on a mission to save you”. It’s super colonial, it’s very odd’* (KfW3). Although some project managers recognize these biases, the participatory rhetoric is still widely employed and thus likely to exert influence on the approach to collaborating with and being accountable towards target communities.

Discussion

‘Participatory development has no pre-determined outcomes, and the space for unintended consequences—both positive and negative—is always present within it (..) any configuration of power and knowledge opens up its own particular spaces and moments for resistance’.

Over the last few decades, critics of participatory development have urged a transition from tokenistic forms of engagement towards genuine empowerment and transformative change (Ferguson 1990; Chambers 1997; Mosse 2004; Fox 2020). As argues, it would be reductionist to attribute the cause of persisting challenges meeting this goal solely to structural intentionality among development agencies, overlooking the nuanced role they can (or cannot) play in participation and development failures. Our analysis provides nuance to this discussion by dissecting the institutional logic that guides the behaviour of project managers working with ICDPs in Latin America. We identify an institutionalised project management logic, made up of specific organisational structures and individual mentalities, that does little to support the direct collaboration with IPLCs across the cycle of conservation and development projects.

The decoupling between development agencies and the local context (Busck-Lumholt et al. 2022) does not inherently hinder development agencies’ ongoing financial support of participatory projects if the impetus for participation is not reliant on their direct involvement. However, as development agencies establish loan and aid requirements, identify management needs, and typically engage in knowledge generation (Enns 2014) and decision-making processes on budgets, time frames and restructuring of project design throughout all project stages (Bernstein and Cashore 2012; Winters 2010), we argue their influence on the foundations for collaborative and participatory projects extends beyond their self-proclaimed role as hands-off facilitators or supervisors.



The project management logic thus risks impeding direct collaboration with local beneficiaries through at least four distinct mechanisms. First, there is a notable emphasis on risk management, efficient implementation, rapid results, extensive investments, and broad project portfolios, institutionalised and reproduced by influential agencies like the World Bank, which holds a prominent position in setting environmental and social standards and regulations (Holland et al. 2004 in Hickey and Mohan 2004, p. 260). According to Scoones (2019), ‘risk’ is often the dimension formally addressed by development agencies in project designs, which he argues is paradoxical, given that ambiguity, uncertainty, and ignorance are the three most common conditions in development. This trait can undermine meaningful implementation as it discourages the adoption of more autonomous operational strategies (Honig 2019) and often incentivizes discretion when standards are impractical to implement (Gulrajani 2014). Discretionary decision-making can emerge as a response to either an excess of rules, where individuals choose which to follow due to the impracticality of adherence to all, or a deficiency of rules, leading to discretionary decision-making filling the regulatory vacuum. Combined with the centralized location of project offices and staff turnover, the focus on risk and control becomes counterproductive to the trust-building necessary for establishing local leadership and fostering direct collaboration with local communities. Such trust-building is known to require time, transparency, long-term commitment, and grounded learning about the local context and priorities (Massarella et al. 2018; Dawson et al. 2021).

Second, performance pressure, directives from central administrations, and perceptions of limited institutional mandates in design and implementation incentivize this emphasis on risk management, budget commitment, and tasks yielding measurable results rather than an investment in direct collaboration with IPLCs (Harris 2021). As put by Martens (2002), ‘when agents face multiple tasks that compete for their time, they will focus on those that are more likely to satisfy their career concerns’ (p. 20). Recent literature underscores the emphasis on measurable outcomes, rapid disbursement, large-scale interventions, and a preference for collaborating with decision-making authorities rather than local beneficiaries as inherent in a bureaucratic development structure (Honig 2019; Harris 2021, 2022). Project managers navigate an organisational structure that involves a ‘broken feedback loop’ between local needs and foreign aid decision-making with “no obvious mechanism for transmitting the beneficiaries’ view” (p. 35). Beneficiaries of ICDPs funded by international development agencies operate outside the political system of the funders (Martens 2002; Gulrajani 2015). Consequently, decision-making authorities in development agencies are more inclined to base their choices on the preferences of their constituencies rather than those of project beneficiaries. This disconnect blurs accountability structures and results in fractured information flows, as the geographical and political divide between donors and beneficiaries increases the costs and reduces the benefits of information exchange (Martens 2002, p. 15).

Third, internal hierarchies and managerial complexity of the role and responsibility of the project manager contribute to the limited collaboration with target communities in ICDPs. What is not documented in the results but



has been pointed out as a trend in international development (Gulrajani 2017) is that the greatest authority in development agencies is most often placed centrally in headquarters. Opportunities to expand local decision-making even if the organizational structure does not facilitate this, are unlikely to be taken advantage of if it is not an explicit part of the project manager's responsibility or career path. There seems to be a persisting patron-client structure within development agencies which has a trickle-down effect on staff at different institutional levels. The more locally grounded the project manager's area of work is, the less prestige there is and, it seems, the less leverage they have in decision-making processes. While they might be officially, and individually, motivated by the interest of local beneficiaries, project managers need to work in the interest of those who have provided financial support for the project or programme. This will forever be a challenge and require checks and balances since both organisations and individuals tend to use institutional orders to their own advantage' (Friedland and Alford 1991, p. 251).

Finally, project managers' 'hands-off' and 'better than nothing' rationales when it comes to participation raise important questions about which symbolic and practical roles development agencies can and should play in the mainstreaming of more locally led ICDPs. The hands-off argument may lead to situations where development agencies leverage a positive reputation for promoting participation without necessarily assuming responsibility for potential negative outcomes. As noted in earlier research on the World Bank, "participation, as imposed by donors, can be too ambitious to be workable and too vague to be monitored" (Molenaers and Renard 2003). This phenomenon can maintain development agencies as highly influential entities in a sector where they might not be the most effective performers.

We acknowledge that the stated hands-off approach is often related to a 'growing emphasis on country ownership of aid programs speaks to the donors' awareness of their accountability to aid recipients' (Winters 2010, p. 224), which speaks to the political relationship with the country partner but may further increase the distance to the local beneficiaries if country partners do not implement the project in a participatory way (Kim et al. 2020). A potential consequence of the institutional distance between project managers and target communities is that development assumes an imagined and political character rather than a practical one. This project management logic draws upon and contributes to the agencies' 'developmentality' (Ilcan and Phillips 2010).

Overall, these findings also underscore the contradiction of using participatory language in agency standards and interviewees' discourse while advocating for a hands-off approach to target beneficiaries. Participatory language and awareness on the importance of local knowledge and decision-making have considerably spread in the development sector since the 1960s, but is rarely realized in practice (Enns 2014). When participation discourse fails to materialize as genuine collaboration, it runs the risk of reinforcing a perception of IPLCs as vulnerable recipients rather than equal partners. This echoes a persistent patronage and victimization mindset, strongly 'bounded' by the organisational structure (Harris 2021, 2022) and



pre-established project goals that local beneficiaries are only invited to contribute to (Busck-Lumholt et al. 2022).

Juxtaposing our results with existing literature reveals a noteworthy convergence, indicating that the project management logic we identify mirrors broader patterns continuously observed in the field. We acknowledge that our data and insights are derived from a limited sample interviewees from selected development agencies financing ICDPs and, for this reason, they should be treated with caution and not be extrapolated to represent the entirety of development agencies. More research is needed to provide information on how institutional logics develop over time and diverge across regions, organisations, project types and size.

Conclusion

In this article, we have used an institutional logic framework to examine why development agencies might fail to integrate target groups' values, knowledge, and needs into ICDPs. We have argued that the challenge of using development agencies to support such projects is not less complicated or urgent than when it became a mainstream approach to development cooperation from the 1960s onwards. Informed by individual interviews with representatives from WB, IDB, KfW, and USAID, we have identified and characterized a project management logic which hampers local participation through several intricate and often ambiguous dimensions of organizational structure and individual mentalities.

Structural organizational barriers stemming from risk-oriented standards and regulations and a high-pressure and results-centric work environment appear to impede project managers' potential for direct engagement with target groups. The role and responsibilities of project managers lean more towards meeting agency-specific expectations than towards engaging with the local context, a responsibility delegated to the contractual counterpart with frequent support from hired consultants. In turn, individual mentalities encompass a hands-off approach to participation challenges, constrained capacities, and a career-oriented motivation to meet higher-level objectives. Project managers show awareness and knowledge regarding the conceptual importance of local participation, yet they do not view themselves as having more than an overseeing role in this regard. In fact, they still express patronage and a view of IPLCs as vulnerable subjects rather than project partners.

One might argue that characterizing the interaction between development agencies and target groups as a failure might not be justifiable if local collaboration is not explicitly designated as a crucial component of project managers' duties and functions. However, such viewpoint may only reify, rather than challenge the current set-up of the international environment, development projects, and particularly the role of development agencies. The analysis offered here has suggested that such agencies need to change their project management logic if they are to raise the prospects for locally anchored and collaborative ICDPs.



Data Availability Statement

Raw data were generated in Nvivo. Derived data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-024-00658-5>.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest There are no financial or personal relationships with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence this work.

Ethical Approval This research got approval from the Ethics Committee on Animal and Human Experimentation (CEEAH) at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). All interviewees have been presented with the research agenda and agreed on record for interview participation and recording.

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