

Chapter 12

Donor Project Funded ICT Initiatives in the Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) Sector of Asian Developing Countries: A Systems Approach to Managing Project Intervention Processes

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is set against a background of national ICT initiatives implemented in the Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) sectors of developing Asian countries through donor agency funded projects. This research is based on a ten year research study of ICT initiatives implemented in nine VTE sector donor funded projects covering Laos, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. The empirical data was gathered through contextual observations, action research and a review of project documentation. The ICT initiatives studied focussed on MIS (management information systems) aiding strategy formulation and management in the VTE sector and computer based training (CBT). The research reveals that the projects studied were designed by host governments and donor agencies in response to perceived problems in the VTE sector. The research also reveals that process of managing donor projects, which is largely based on hard approaches, is problematic. Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) is based on a learning and enquiring cycle. The research uses SSM to learn about the nature and scope of the selected donor projects in VTE, which can be conceptualised as Project Intervention Processes (PIPs).

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to contribute to the gap in theory and practice by investigating the management issues of ICT initiatives implemented through donor funded projects in the VTE sector of selected Asian developing economies. The countries studied in the research are Vietnam, Laos and Sri Lanka. At the outset, the broad research goal was:

Using a soft systems approach to explore strategy and management issues of project based ICT initiatives in the VTE sector of particular South and South East Asian Developing Economies with a view to help establish good practice and contribute to the literature.

This broad research goal will be addressed through the following research sub-questions:

1. What is the nature and scope of donor funded projects with ICT initiatives in the VTE sector of developing Asian countries studied?
2. How can SSM contribute to the managing of donor funded projects with ICT initiatives in the VTE sector of Asian developing countries?
3. What are the generic lessons from the application of SSM to project based ICT initiatives in the VTE sector which help inform donor project management practice and theory?

The research studied nine projects, three each in Laos, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. Each project was initiated by a sponsor domain (donor agency) for a host domain (Government. Access to these VTE donor funded projects was made possible through the authors' positioning as a formal project team member in the projects studied. Each project studied targeted a multi-organisational VTE sector spanning central government institutions, provincial government institutions and VTE schools. Each project had a number of ICT initiatives, each of which could be seen a sub-intervention. Each of these ICT initiatives had a number of 'Activities'

with 'Expectations' in terms of a 'Response' from the VTE sector actors and a set of 'Outcomes'.

The observations from the research revealed that the process of managing projects was problematic and that projects were not being managed appropriately to generate desirable outcomes from the ICT initiatives to improve perceived VTE problems. This research contributes to the theory of project management by applying SSM as an approach to the management of donor based ICT projects in developing countries.

The presentation and interpretation of this research is structured into five major parts. Firstly the current state of the area of concern, VTE in Asian developing countries, is reviewed in terms of the nature of VTE, emerging issues and ICT initiatives in VTE. These provide the contextual setting for the implementation of IS initiatives through donor projects. The second part of the paper positions the research theoretically. In addition to the central concern of donor project management the research framework explicitly considers the use of SSM in managing donor project based ICT initiatives as it provides an intellectual device for learning and enquiry. Part three details the research approach and the empirical design. Part four presents the research outcomes and the interpretation of these. Finally, part 5 provides conclusions to the research.

VTE TRENDS IN ASIAN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

VTE Nature and Emerging Issues

In the context of Asian developing economies, the vocational and technical education (VTE) sector plays a pivotal role in meeting the human resource requirements of national economic development (ILO, 2002). The broad aim of VTE is to equip work-forces, in particular school leavers, for job opportunities across a range of 'labour markets' brought about by industry needs (Middleton *et al* 1993). VTE comprises 'vocational training'

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