



## Understanding and Appreciating Success in Development (Part 2)

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So, over the years we have had a lot of people deeply engaged in discussing how to better understand success. Let me list several issues that participants have identified over the years.

One aspect has to do with **strict and loose interpretations of “success”**. Some people say how we understand something to be successful, really depends on how strict that definition of success it is. If its broad or loose, maybe we are willing to accept that things are more successful than if it is a strict definition.

Some participants over the years have also argued that we, as scholars, as practitioners, as development professionals often have **a tendency of aiming too high**, i.e. our expectations are sometimes unrealistic and contribute to a feeling of under-achievement. So, having realistic expectations perhaps is a key to understanding and even evaluating success.

Others highlight the **distinction between short-term and long-term impacts** and consequently **direct and indirect results**. Sometimes we are aiming for short-term success, and sometimes we are able to highlight certain projects as being extremely successful, but they may not continue to be successful in the long run.

And for a lot of people, a developmental success is when the **changes are long-lasting**.

Others would say that **the extent to which a community identifies a problem and then develops adequate responses** with the help of interested individuals, groups and organisations is a crucial factor. We can't have experts define what a community needs – that there should be genuine participation of the community during various phases of a project. Not just in the beginning, not just in the middle, but actually throughout.

Another aspect actually has to do with **the extent of follow-up that is provided by various stakeholders** in or during a development project.

Simultaneously it is also important to identify **relationship between donor priorities/constraints related to funding**, personnel, you name it, and recipient priorities/constraints ... it could be countries, local governments, communities, etc.

In terms of the **effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation**, some argue that it is really important for a better understanding of success, to make any monitoring and evaluating exercise less bureaucratic and time-consuming.

And one common theme that emerges from a lot of our students in previous years is **learning from past mistakes**.

Now, let's tackle some of the other **issues related to impacts**.

Some of my students, and also my colleagues, have over the years talked about how difficult it is to measure some impacts, and some impacts that are absolutely not possible to measure.

How we define a project, how we define a goal, could well decide why some goals are just not measurable, and in that case, it may be difficult to firmly establish whether it is successful, or it would be difficult to quantify it. But in practice you may have an understanding that something is successful, but you can't really prove it.

Several practitioners also typically want the development community to **embrace the complexity of 'measuring success in development'** rather than seeing this as something that complicates/prevents a project from becoming successful.

If all parties involved are clear on what they would consider successful and how this can be measured from a project's inception (and this is transparent in all concluding reports), we may be able to create a space for shared learning & best practice. This would also allow us, as some people say, **to talk the same language**. I think, we often don't talk the same language, and therefore have different ideas of definitions and measurements.

Another indicator for measuring success, or at least evaluating and better understanding, is **capacity building**. Some people would argue that if a program equips a community with skills to help themselves in the future, then it is successful. So, in other words, **to what extent is a community, a group, less dependent on outside help?** Has the knowledge or technology been transferred to actually improve the lives of the communities?

And finally, groups of students have in previous years argued **that success is really about helping, or making changes, that constitutes three aspects**: one is, helping as many of the target population as possible. Secondly, do it as cost-effectively as possible and thirdly, progress for as long as possible.

So, that was a quick summary of some of the class discussions we have had over the last couple of years where students and participants have tried to discuss and identify factors that determine a successful development project or programme.

It is very difficult, if not impossible in a short span of three weeks to provide a comprehensive overview of all dimensions of successful development. We have, of course, chosen to prioritize a few domains, like **economic growth and poverty reduction; food and nutrition security and agriculture**. We will also be talking about medical outcomes and **what works in terms of health**. And finally, in terms of **institutions development, governance, rule of law, human rights**.

You will hear successful case stories from all parts of the world, but it is really important for us to also highlight that this is a work in progress, and I would really appreciate your help in identifying and making us aware, of other cases, other dimensions, that you consider important in this context. So, please keep your suggestions coming, and I really look forward to following the discussions in the next few weeks.

Thank you very much.