



Understanding and Appreciating “Success” (Part 1)

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Hello and welcome back to *What Works*.

Today we will be talking about what we understand by the term “success” or the alternative term we are using sometimes, which is “promising practices”. It is important for me just say this upfront. There is a lot of discourse, a lot of debate, a lot of agreements but also a lot of disagreements on what one means by the term success.

One way of starting this discussion would be to perhaps ask a set of interrelated questions: *What is the problem that we are trying to solve?* And has this problem been solved? A second set of questions relates to *the goals for the project* (or one specific goal for the project). And were these goals (or the goal) achieved?

And related to both of these issues about problems and goals, we need to also ask *who* the target of development projects and programs has been. Were they reached out to? *Did they participate?* Were their thoughts and needs considered in the programming? Were different stakeholders involved? *To what extent did some people influence the process more than others?*

Some scholars talk about, when defining success, seeing the term success in relation to so-called *triple constraints*. These are time, budget and scope. For example, how long did it take for the project to achieve completion? How much did it cost? Some people say we should be looking at the cost benefit analysis. But also, the scope. *What was the pace of change?* How many people, or how large a territory was covered?

So, these issues – about who is benefiting from development (e.g. was it the poorest of the poor?), and was it done (this project or program) in a cost-effective way – are often the metrics for measuring success or using impact.

Others would say it is actually very unhelpful to even talk about these categories because some agencies, some organizations, some individuals are often interested in *exaggerating success*. There have been accusations against certain civil society organisations who have been accused of exaggerating need, or exaggerating the problem, in order to attract more funding. So, some people feel that “success” often leads manipulation of data, and we need to be aware of that.

But an important aspect of success relates to replication. Can something that has worked somewhere be copied or replicated, even scaled up, somewhere else? Others argue that we should not really be talking about replication. If something has worked in one area, let us try to better understand what happened, and what were the factors that lead to successful

implementation, even if this project cannot be replicated elsewhere. The counterargument is that we really need to examine (and filter out), what is working, unpack that and perhaps apply it elsewhere.

Now, one of the things that I would also highlight is not just the “expert” views on success, but also the views of thousands of course participants from 150 countries that have attended this course since 2015. And I want to list or at least highlight some of those factors that the students and participants of this course have identified, which according to them, helps explain or better understand the term success.