

UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

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Key words: Development project, program, private sector projects, project cycle.

This newsletter explains what distinguishes a development project from a program and from a private-sector project, emphasizing public good, multiple accountabilities, political economy, local ownership, and sustainability. It then presents a six-phase, evidence-based project cycle and shows how results-based management, adaptive decision-making, and donor terminology fit within it.

DEFINITION

A development project is a temporary, organized effort designed to improve the **social, economic, institutional, or environmental conditions of a defined population, community, or institution**. It has a beginning and an end, works within a finite budget, and is expected to create public good that lasts beyond the project's formal life.

A development program is a coordinated set of interlinked projects and on-going activities pursuing a shared medium- or long-term goal.

Project: bounded and specific

Use a project when the objective is narrow and clearly defined: build a bridge, rehabilitate ten wells, or train a specified group of health workers.

- 1. Clear boundary.** A defined beginning, end, scope, budget, team, and set of deliverables.
- 2. Direct accountability.** Performance is assessed against the project's own results, schedule, cost, and quality.
- 3. Formal closure.** The temporary structure closes when its objective is achieved, transferred, or terminated.

Program: coordinated and systemic

Use a program when the goal is broader, longer-term, or transformative: strengthen a national health system or build agricultural resilience across regions.

- 1. Several connected initiatives.** Related projects and continuing operations are managed together.
- 2. Benefits across the whole.** It manages dependencies and captures results no single project can deliver alone.
- 3. Longer strategic horizon.** Component projects may close while the program continues and adapts.

Figure 1. Project vs Program

One bounded, unique story — or a coordinated set of stories pursuing a larger arc, worth more together than apart



WHICH TO GREENLIGHT?

■ **Make the film** when the objective is narrow and well defined — build this bridge, train these health workers: focused discipline, clear milestones, fixed budget, measurable short-term results.

■ **Commission the series** when the goal is broad, systemic, or transformative — overhaul a health system, build agricultural resilience: integrate the projects, manage the dependencies, adapt over time.

THE CASTING RULE

Know which one you are running — a film managed like a series drifts; a series managed like a film falls apart at the dependencies.

Field example. A national maternal health program

Suppose a government wants to reduce maternal and newborn deaths. **Separate projects** may rehabilitate facilities, train midwives, strengthen medicines and blood supply, improve ambulance and referral services, and expand public information, while policy and health-financing reforms continue across the system. Each project has its own scope, budget, manager, deliverables, and closure date. **The program manages their dependencies and combined health benefits; it is not simply a large project.**

Project test

1. **Temporary.** A defined beginning and end.
2. **Unique.** A defined product, service, or change.
3. **Finite.** Limited budget under accountable management.

Program test

1. **Interdependent.** Several related projects and continuing functions.
2. **Strategic.** Benefits are achieved across the whole, not one project.
3. **Continuing.** Coordination persists while components start, close, or adapt.

Key Takeaway. Choose the management unit by the objective, not by the size of the budget: one clear product is a project; several interdependent interventions pursuing one strategic result form a program.

Private vs. Development project

Same Discipline, Different Stakes

Development projects use familiar management tools, but apply them under a distinctive purpose, accountability structure, and operating context.

The Shared Discipline

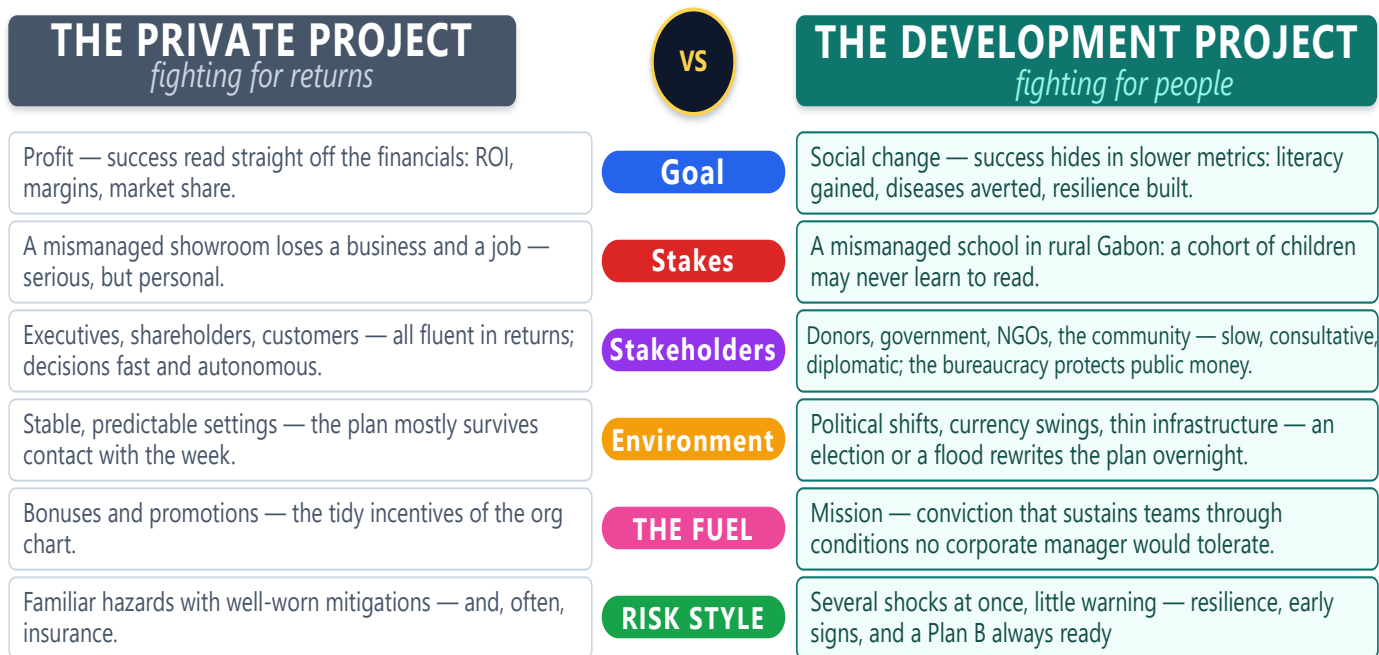
Both private and development projects manage scope, schedule, cost, quality, procurement, risk, contracts, people, and governance. A Gantt chart or risk register can be useful in Bamako or Boston.

The Development Twist

The difference is not a simple opposition between profit and people. Development projects pursue public value under multiple accountabilities, distributional obligations, and institutional and political conditions that shape whether results are achieved.

Figure 2. Private and development projects compared across six dimensions.

Same discipline, different stakes — the private project and the development project, measured side by side before the bell



Same gym, different bout — both fighters train on the same equipment — a Gantt chart, a work-breakdown structure, a risk register are as useful in Bamako as in Boston. The development corner simply bends the playbook toward flexibility, contingency, and local reality: the schedule must survive an election, the budget a currency crash, the plan a rainy season.

THE JUDGES' CARD

The management logic is similar; the stakes are not.

Defining Traits (1-3)

- 1. Public or social purpose.** Success is measured by improvements in people's lives, institutions, or the community - not by financial return alone.
- 2. Crowded accountability.** Governments, funders, communities, citizens, NGOs, and implementers may define success differently.
- 3. Political economy, institutions, and volatility.** Incentives, power relations, rivalries, formal and informal rules, capacity, elections, inflation, insecurity, and climate shocks can reshape delivery.

The familiar playbook therefore expands to include political-economy analysis, consultation, institutional strengthening, safeguards, flexibility, ethics, and continuous learning.

What This Changes for the Manager (4-5)

- 4. Ownership and sustainability.** Local people and institutions must shape the response and be able to carry its benefits forward.
- 5. Measurement and transparency.** Outputs are not enough; projects must show whether people use them and whether conditions improve.

The Political-Economy Check

Before approving a technically sound design, ask: Who benefits? Who may lose or resist? Who has formal authority and informal influence? What incentives support or obstruct implementation? Does the responsible institution have the staff, systems, budget, legitimacy, and decision power to deliver and sustain the project?

What The Manager Should Do

Map incentives and potential veto players; test institutional capacity honestly; assign ownership for reforms and recurrent costs; and build capacity strengthening into the design rather than assuming it will appear later.

From The Field

Near Zambia's Kafue River, a technically sound tomato project failed because the team never asked why local farmers avoided a fertile riverbank: hippos ate the crop. The lesson is not about wildlife. It is that context beats cleverness, and local knowledge belongs in the design from the start.

The Implementability Test. A strong project is technically credible, politically workable, and institutionally deliverable. Check:

- (1) technical logic; (2) incentives and veto players; (3) institutional mandate and capacity; (4) budget and recurrent costs; (5) fairness and legitimacy; and (6) ownership after closure.

Project Cycle: Six Phases, One Connected System

The cycle turns a development idea into a sequence of evidence, decisions, delivery, learning, and transition.

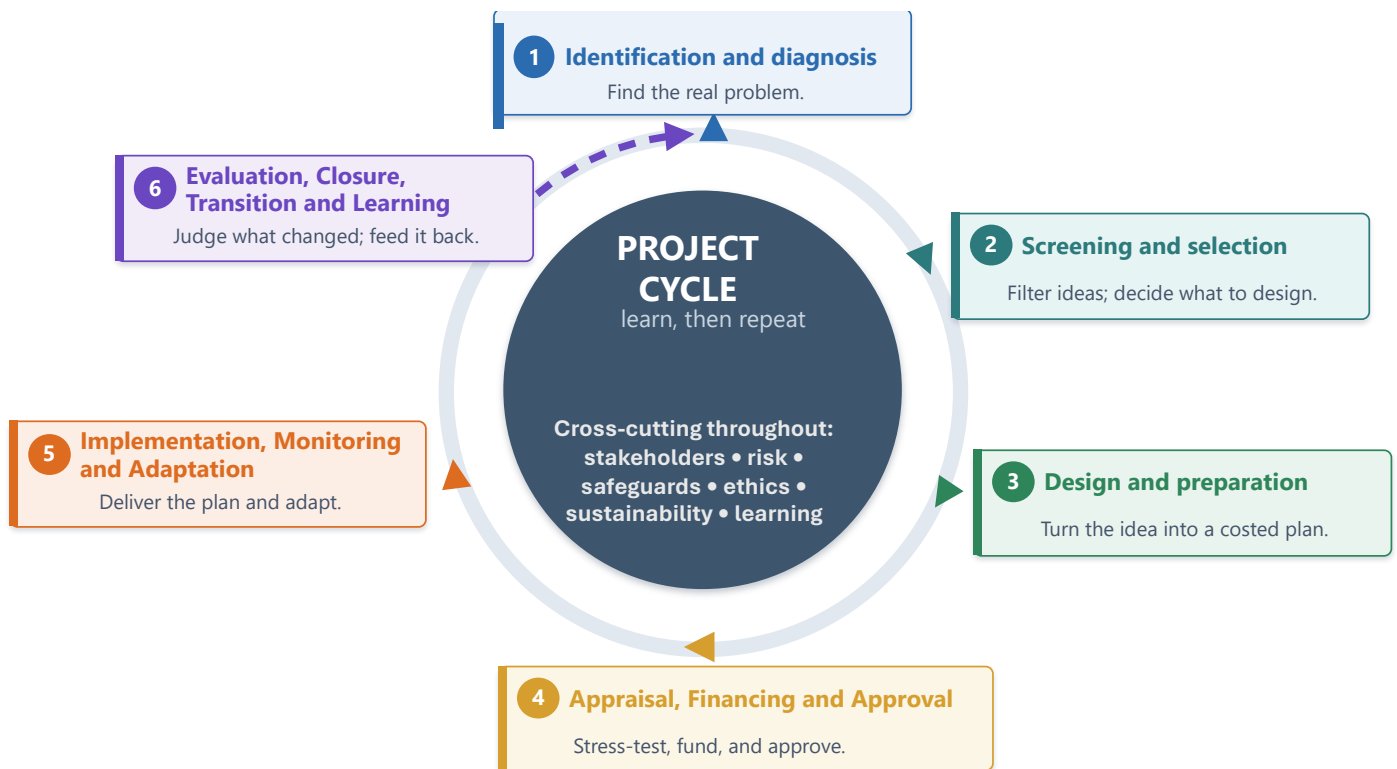
Why a Cycle?

A project cycle imposes discipline without pretending that reality is tidy. Each phase asks a management question, assembles evidence, and ends with a recorded decision before scarce resources and commitments advance.

Not a Straitjacket

Real projects loop back. New evidence can reopen the diagnosis, a failed assumption can force redesign, and monitoring can trigger authorized adaptation. The model is intentionally iterative, especially in fragile or uncertain contexts.

Figure 3. The development project cycle.



Operational Gates 1-3

1. Identification and Diagnosis

Evidence: Problem statement, initial data, stakeholder and political-economy scan.

Authority: Sponsoring ministry, agency, or portfolio authority.

Verdict: Proceed, revise, or stop.

2. Screening and Selection

Evidence: Concept note and documented screen of relevance, fit, feasibility, safeguards, benefit, and sustainability.

Authority: Concept or portfolio review committee.

Verdict: Prepare, revise, defer, or reject.

3. Design and Preparation

Evidence: Theory of Change, results framework, feasibility, safeguards, implementation plan, budget, financing plan, and risk register.

Authority: Project sponsor and technical or quality-review body.

Verdict: Submit for appraisal, redesign, or stop.

Operational Gates 4-6

4. Appraisal, Financing, and Approval

Evidence: Independent appraisal, financing package, approval memorandum, and recorded conditions.

Authority: Government and funder authority, board, or delegated committee.

Verdict: Approve, approve with conditions, defer, or reject.

5. Implementation, Monitoring, and Adaptation

Evidence: Workplan, contracts, schedule, cost and results data, risk and issue status, and change analysis.

Authority: Project manager within delegation; higher authority for material changes.

Verdict: Continue, correct, restructure, suspend, or escalate.

6. Evaluation, Closure, Transition, and Learning

Evidence: Evaluation and completion findings, financial and contract closure, handover, and sustainability arrangements.

Authority: Sponsor, implementing institution, government, and funder.

Verdict: Close, extend, transition, or continue follow-up.

Gate Discipline

Every gate should leave a dated record: who decided, on what evidence, what conditions were attached, and who owns the next action.

Cross-cutting throughout: stakeholder engagement, communication, risk, safeguards, ethics, climate resilience, sustainability, and learning.

Crisis management may be activated at any phase.

Note: *The minimum evidence and authorities shown are indicative. Institutional and legal requirements vary, but the gate, evidence, authority, and verdict should always be explicit.*

Where The ToC and RBM fit

Results-Based Management (RBM) is not a seventh phase; it keeps every phase focused on change rather than activity.

1-2. Diagnose and select. Define the problem, affected groups, desired change, options, and early assumptions.

3. Design. Build the Theory of Change (ToC), Results Framework, indicators, baseline plan, targets, assumptions, and risks.

4. Appraise and approve. Test the causal pathway, feasibility, measurability, and acceptability of assumptions and risks.

5. Implement and adapt. Monitor indicators and assumptions, revisit the ToC, and make controlled changes.

6. Evaluate and learn. Judge what changed, why, for whom, and whether it will last; feed the findings into the next cycle.

Adapt, Loop Back, Or Seek Renewed Approval?

The key question is whether the change remains within delegated authority or alters the approved commitment.

Adapt within the approved project

Use when: Delivery methods, sequencing, staffing, communication, or minor reallocations change within delegated limits.

Condition: The objective, principal results, target population, total financing, safeguards, and legal obligations remain intact.

Loop back to an earlier phase

Use when: New evidence challenges the diagnosis, selected solution, Theory of Change, feasibility, or a critical assumption.

Action: Return to identification, design, or appraisal before proceeding.

Seek renewed approval

Use when: A material change affects the objective, outcomes, scope, geography, beneficiaries, budget, financing, closing date, safeguards, major procurement, or legal and institutional commitments.

Authority: The original approving body or a formally delegated authority.

Fragile or highly uncertain settings

Use: Shorter planning horizons, modular components, scenario triggers, frequent reviews, and pre-agreed thresholds.

Emergency action: Document temporary measures and submit them for formal review or ratification as soon as circumstances permit.

Working Across Development Institutions

Same Cycle, Different Institutional Vocabulary

The labels and decision gates vary by institution, but the underlying management functions substantially overlap.

Learn the Logic Before the Label

A World Bank officer, an AfDB task manager, an ADB specialist, and a UNDP program manager may use different words for comparable work. Translate the function first; the acronym comes second.

Read the Map Approximately

Institutional processes differ by instrument, project type, country, and date. Read the figure as a translation guide, not as a claim that every organization has identical gates or documents.

Figure 4. The six-phase teaching model mapped approximately to four major development institutions.

Phase (DSI model)	World Bank	AfDB	ADB	UNDP
Identification	Identification	Identification	Identification	Identifying & defining
Screening & selection	Concept review (PCN)	Concept-note review	Concept clearance	Justifying / concept
Design & preparation	Preparation	Preparation	Preparation (PPTA)	Design (ToC + framework)
Appraisal & financing	Appraisal → Board	Appraisal → Board	Appraisal → Approval	Appraisal (LPAC) → Approval
Implementation & monitoring	Implementation & supervision	Implementation & supervision	Implementation & admin.	Implementing & monitoring
Evaluation	Completion (ICR) → IEG	Completion (PCR) → IDEV	Completion (PCR) → IED	Closure → evaluation

Conclusion

Development projects use familiar management tools, but their public purpose, multiple accountabilities, and complex institutional environments require a broader approach. A disciplined yet adaptable project cycle helps managers connect evidence, decisions, implementation, evaluation, and learning while remaining responsive to changing circumstances. Lasting results ultimately depend on sound technical design, political and institutional feasibility, local ownership, and a clear focus on public value.



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