The Challenge of Managing Democratic Elections in Africa – Making Election Management Bodies (EMBs) Work as Project Oriented Organizations (POOs)

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Many African Election Management Bodies (EMBs) are finding it necessary to implement better election management practices. This realization often comes as a result of frustrations in managing successful elections. Recent electoral challenges in Nigeria are a clear testimony to electoral establishments needs to embrace project management best practices. Political turbulent in Tanzania, Ivory Coast, Uganda, Egypt and others are partly due to challenges of managing election activities – managing these as programmes and projects. This paper raises issues of project management best practices which are relevant in electoral processes. It provides help to those who are involved in managing African Election Management Bodies (EMBs) to learn how to create an environment that can help avoid these challenges/or failures. When electoral activities/programmes challenges create a focus on the need to change the way election programmes are managed, people soon learn that this change profoundly affects the entire electoral establishment. Successful elections require participation from many parts of the EMB; the development of successful election management practices cannot be accomplished in one or two departments alone. Skills in practices require a coordinated effort involving all departments in an electoral establishment. The change must be systematic and system wide. This paper explores best practices in political election management through the domain of strategic project management best practices. The paper examines the need for project management in electoral organizations and the development of new, project-based EMBs; it also examines one of the components of successful environment: linking electoral projects to organizational strategy; it examines upper-management practices of EMBs that thwart the successful development of managing electoral projects; it further addresses the problem of organizing the electoral project management effort; it covers the importance of information in the successful electoral project management environment; furthermore, the paper discusses electoral project managers selection and development; the basic principles of the EMB as the learning organization are also addressed; and finally examples of how to implement the needed changes in managing EMBs are given.

INTRODUCTION

Flawed general elections have become a trademark of most African countries. Countries (e.g., Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo. Ivory Coast. Zimbabwe, to mention a few) have gone through traumatic experiences characterized by pre and post-electoral violence following disputed presidential and parliamentary elections (Reynolds 2009, Enabulele and Ewere 2010). The consequences of the violence in most situations have seen the loss of lives, the displacement of people in some countries (for example in Kenya and Ivory Coast). destruction of the livelihoods of millions of people, and wanton destruction of property and infrastructure, worth billions of dollars (This, in most situations has led to the further abuse of human rights and has further diminished trust and confidence in the political leadership and state security agents. The tensions and wave of violence have ruptured the social fabric that had held the nations together and ethnic relations in some countries, have became explosive (for example in Kenya and Ivory Coast) (Reynolds 2009, Enabulele and Ewere 2010). This ugly face of elections in Africa. which is described by Luqman (2009) as *'an exercise in futility'* has to a number of countries led to the

collapse of democratization. The majority of countries are thus crying for the totality of the electoral cycle.

Discussing what could be described as *'best practices in electoral practices'* and using Nigerian experience as a case study, Luqman (2009) argues that free, fair and credible elections are not just about events that take place on election day alone. He argues that they relate to the totality of the electoral cycle and consist of important issues (good practices) as indicated in Figure 1. Non of these electoral cycle good practices are realised in most of African countries.

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- Provision of credible and updated voters' register(#)

- A functioning party system

- Nomination of candidates system

- Conducting of a violent free party campaigns(#)

- Adequate provision of voting materials(#)

- Appropriate actual conduct of the voting(#)

- Speedy counting and declaration of results and post-election activities (including elections petitions and the fair and speedy resolution of all litigations emerging from the conduct of the election (#)

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Practices marked with (#) are within EMBs management compass

Figure 1 Total electoral cycle good practices (TECGPs)
Source: Luqman (2009)

In most African countries the electoral cycle good practices listed in Box 1, are expected to be overseen by independent electoral institutions [specifically those identified with (#)] – referred to in this paper as Election Management Bodies (EMBs) (Mozaffar 2002). This requirement, places the electoral institution at a strategic position in a respective country's democratization process, it remains the principal body charged with the responsibility of managing the electoral process. In view of this, argues Luqman (2009), the success of any elections and electoral process is directly linked to the competency of the electoral institution.

The controversies and disputes surrounding elections in various countries in Africa [e.g., Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Tanzania (the Zanzibar turbulences), Malawi, Democratic Republic of Congo) are primarily caused by inabilities of EMBs to embrace the TECGPs (Bratton and van de Walle 1997; McMahon 1994].

The inability of African Election Management Bodies (EMBs) to embrace TECGPs is described by Enabulele and Ewere (2010) using an interesting metaphor of a *shepherd* and a *wolf* – *'When the shepherd becomes the wolf.'* Focusing on Nigeria turbulences, they argue that there is overwhelming evidence from the courts in Nigeria that the Nigeria EMB (the Independent National Electoral Commission) openly descended into the arena of political rivalry and took sides with its preferred candidates in intra party contests and its preferred political party in inter party contests, and hence became blinded by its desire to ensure victory for such candidates at all cost and against all known democratic values it was established by law to nurture.

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The Nigerian experience on EMB practice seems to be a mirror image of what has happened in DRC, Kenya, Uganda, Ivory Coast, just to mention a few. Most of African Election Management Bodies (EMBs) have since abandoned the tenets of TECGPs and instead crossed over to the side of illegality and immorality. Searching for a solution to this sorry state, Enabulele and Ewere (2010) use the Nigerian case to provide a solution to Africa. They cry for the need to redeem the African EMBs from the iron claws that hold them bound and thus redeem electoral processes in order to install the needed representative democracy across the African continent. The central question to be asked therefore is: How do we redeem the African EMBs? The next sections of this paper provide an answer to this question.

AFRICAN ELECTION MANAGEMENT BODIES (EMBs) – THE REDEEMING ROAD

In order to understand the path towards redeeming the African EMBs it is fundamental to reflect on the characteristics of typical tasks (e.g., conducting voter education, conducting elections, voting process close-out). The typical bulk of EMBs tasks are projects. They meet characteristics of projects: *these tasks are unique, transient endeavours to achieve a desired outcome* [Association for Project Management (APM) 2006]. Furthermore, these tasks are usually *temporary endeavours undertaken to create unique products or services, or results* [Project Management Institute (PMI) 2004].

Since the typical bulk of African EMBs tasks fall within what the Association for Project Management and Project Management Institute define as projects and the fact that a typical African EMB requires: *speed and voters responsiveness for success; to develop new processes or services regularly which require inputs from diverse areas of specialized knowledge; the capability to manage the rapid expansion of technological possibilities in almost every area of its set-up in order to avoid destabilization of its structure;* and *to facilitate an environment which will help its senior managers to feel much confident in their understanding of and control over a great many of the tasks going on within,* it is fundamental that they should be structured and managed as project oriented organizations (POOs) (Dinsmore 1998; Levine 1998; Williams 1997).

There are strong indications to suggest that the turbulents experienced by various countries during elections as discussed above, have been caused partly by a dominant situation of managing EMBs as POOs by default (functioning in a non project environment). By moving away from the default environment, most of EMBs will be able to embrace TECGPs and consequently contribute positively to the findings of Edigheji (2006) which Luqman (2009) referred to as *'institutional conditionality necessary for a credible electoral process'*. These conditionalities include: *an independent judiciary; an independent, competent, credible and non-partisan electoral body;* and *a developed system of political parties.* The second conditionality is primarily within EMB reach through being structured and functioning as a fully fledged POO. The question to be advanced therefore is: **What should EMBs do to function as fully fledged POOs?**

EMBs – FROM A NON PROJECT ENVIRONMENT TO POO –WHAT TO DO

The only way EMBs can embrace Edigheji's (2006) second conditionality for a credible electoral process is to move away from current environment (non-project environment/default environment) to one in which projects are organized and used to accomplish special tasks to a full-fledged project-oriented organization. According to Meredith and Mantel (2010), this fundamental move will present senior EMBs management with an extraordinarily difficult transition, but is doable. They further argue that the process is time consuming and even when the required resources are available and senior management is fully committed to the transition, it is

still an arduous process. Kotter (1997) provides a step by step process that must be successfully completed if the change is to be accomplished. For lack of space and brevity a brief account of the process from Kotter (1997), Graham and Englund (2004) and Cleland and Ireland (2007) is articulated in this paper.

Based on proven practices, Graham and Englund (2004), Cleland and Ireland (2007) and Kotter (1997) provide six pieces of the successful-project picture:

(a) EMBs Change to Project-Based Organisations (POOs)

Graham and Englund (2004) argue that changing to a POO requires change in behaviour of the EMB upper managers and event/project managers. They strongly insist that an EMB must also be team based; to create such an organization, upper managers and project managers must themselves work as a team.

One of the challenges facing EMBs and specifically the executives is the need to have an appropriate organization structure. The organization structure which a hybrid of traditional structures (functional and pure matrix). An organizational structure with optimum bureaucracy – *the organic organization structure*. With an organic organization, everyone takes responsibility for the success of the whole. According to Graham and Englund (2004), the basic notion of regulating relations among employees by separating them into specific predefined functions that are determined by problems rather than by structure.

Moving to a POO will present unique challenges to EMBs upper managers, these include:

- *The leader has little or no 'position power'*: The position power inherent in functional organizations has to change as the POO is introduced. Upper managers need to develop project managers and other senior personnel so that they can lead based on influence rather than positional authority.

- *Conflicts arise over team member time and resource requirements*: Upper managers should have a good plan and work on priorities. Internal market pricing should be used to allocate scarce resources – individuals or organizations pay with internal charge accounts for services they find valuable. Details of this approach are given elsewhere [McGrath (1996), Englund, Graham and Dinsmore (2003)].

- *Organizational boundaries are unclear*: Managing of electoral processes often requires cooperation among various EMB units. If people see evidence that cooperation is not valued, then achieving cooperation is almost impossible. Upper managers need to create a structure where cooperation is rewarded. This is discussed in detail elsewhere [McGrath (1996)].

- *Time and organizational pressures abound*: Upper management should be ready to support the best practices that allow reduction in cycle time. This includes developing a core team system and facilitating communication with customers.

- *Team members do not know one another*: Effective project teams require unprecedented levels of trust and openness. The climate of trust and openness starts at the top. McGrath (1996), Englund, Graham and Dinsmore (2003) provide more details on this aspect.

- *Team members are independent and self-motivated*: Because team members may not even work for the EMB, lead project managers need to develop influence skills, and upper management should support that process [McGrath (1996), Englund, Graham and Dinsmore (2003)].

All the above challenges require that EMBs upper managers' work together to develop a process aimed at encouraging new types of behaviour. The shift to a POO requires a concerted effort from all EMB upper managers.

(b) Emphasize the Link Between Strategy and Projects

Although electoral processes are central to any EMB practice, in most of EMBs projects/tasks they work on seem unlinked to a coherent strategy and the upper managers seem to be unaware of the total number and scope of projects being undertaken. As a result some employees feel they are working at cross purposes, on too many unneeded projects, and on too many projects generally. According Graham and Englund (2004), giving projects a strategic emphasis is the first move towards contributing to creating an environment for successful projects.

Project leaders need to know that they are not alone – *that others require resources too*. The spirit of cooperation should be encouraged and it is more likely to be achieved if they feel they are part of a larger project- *part of the project team that is implementing a strategy*. They will be more cooperative with other projects when they see the needs of their project in the light of the needs of the entire EMB (Graham and Englund 2004).

Dealing with the problem of sub-optimization – sub-optimization occurs when individual lead project managers try to optimize their own projects by hoarding resources and otherwise acting independently of all other projects, hence the need for cooperation and communication in order to avoid this problem. Such behaviour when left to flourish in an EMB may make one project more successful, but usually at the expense of others.

There are three steps to fight against sub-optimization by EMB upper management (Graham and Englund 2004):

(a) To make sure that all participants understand the total system. They need to know the total number of projects in the system, the goal of each project, the goal of the system, and the other participants.

(b) Participants should understand that the common resource pool will be managed by the upper management committee or programme management office. This means that upper managers should allocate resources based on a rational assessment of what is best for the entire EMB.

(c) In order to make the above work, there needs to be a means of communication among system participants, one that allows open and rapid communication between and within all levels of the PM system. All lead project managers/task leaders need to know what other lead project managers are doing so they can know what effect their decisions have on others and on the system as a whole. More details are given in McGrath (1996) and Englund, Graham and Dinsmore (2003).

In summary, upper management in EMBs should make sure that they optimize their involvement in every project and contribute towards project success. They need to make sure that systems are developed that support multiple project management; and various such systems should include motivating interdepartmental cooperation and developing project sponsorship.

(c) Understand the EMB Upper Management Influence

There are a number of common mistakes which EMBs make as the assigned projects progress. These mistakes (old habits) have potential to contribute to premature deaths of EMBs in the new project environment and they have to be changed. In many ways, dropping old habits is more difficult than learning new ones, but the change is necessary to create a successful project management environment (Graham and Englund 2004).

One old problem within EMBs is an attempt by managers to schedule too many projects at one time. In this situation everyone wants their project done *now!* Of course, there is never enough capacity in the organization to do all projects simultaneously. Nevertheless, there is usually pressure to run as many projects as possible at the same time, doing them in parallel. The usual management response to this problem according to Graham and Englund (2004) is to spread people across many projects and tell them that *'multitasking is the way we do things here'* and that *'everybody knows that is the best way to get the most work done.'*

There is enough evidence (Meredith and Mantel 2010) to suggest that switching projects is a very complicated task, so the time lost in project switching is probably 40%, meaning that two days per week per person are lost on this practice. Switching from one project to another project requires a very complex adjustment of working parameters due to the following attributes of projects: **time line and due date differences** (shifting requires a reset in the mental time horizon); **project goals** (internalization of project goals drives the behaviour of project team members); **phase of the project** (as project progresses, the contents of activities are radically different from the beginning to the end of a project) ; **discipline involved** (team members become accustomed to working with certain set of organizational discipline on the project team); **team members involved** (getting used to certain individuals with a certain set of attributes); **lead project managers (PMs)** (different lead PMs have different styles of management) ; and **time passes** (spending time reviewing past decisions in order to understand what is going on).
What can be done? Unless different PMs are used for different projects, it is important to switch from doing projects in parallel to doing them in series. The field of concurrent engineering, advocates doing many activities in parallel to shorten product or service life cycles. This is acceptable if different PMs do the activities and in different functional areas. The problem arises if the same PM or PMs try to do tasks in parallel. With different PMs, it still falls on the programme manager to task switch. Keep PMs doing project work focused as much as possible on a single project.

The need to plan: In many EMBs, there is a general lack of appreciation of the importance of planning for every project identified. Upper managers do not seem to understand its necessity and thus do not usually allow enough time for proper planning. Upper managers need to know that planning is a critical element that decreases costs and total project time while increasing deliverable quality. Hamel and Prahalad (1994) and Wheelwright (1996) provide more direction on challenges and best practices.

(d) Develop a Core Team Process
According to Graham and Englund (2004), an important function of upper management in a POO is supporting project teams by designing the organization to support project management (PM). They strongly suggest that this can be done by either redesigning the organization to emphasize projects or integrating projects into the current organization. Either way, the upper management team crucially should define the project lead PM's job, degree of authority and autonomy, and relationship to both the home department of the project and other departments in the EMB. Upper management should also play key roles in specifying communication channels, methods of conflict resolution between the project and the rest of the EMB, and how project management attention should be directed – this is the relative priorities of outcome, cost and schedule.

Issues of grouping people in organizations, reporting relationships, delegation of authority, empowerment, the criteria by which people are grouped together, the rules and procedures that determine what people in various groups do and pay attention to, and the patterns of interactions fostered by delegation, grouping, rules, and procedures, are considered to be pillars of

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organizational structure. These take place between two clear points – one extreme influenced by *centralization* and the other point *decentralization*.

The author strongly recommends decentralization in EMBs – where middle level PMs and junior PMs are empowered to free senior PMs for strategic planning. The task of decentralization becomes more challenging in EMBs due to the extent of activities like: more decisions are made at lower levels in the hierarchy; the number of important decisions made at lower level increases; more functions are affected by decisions made at lower levels; and fewer decisions made at lower levels must be checked with senior higher management (Senior PMs).

Another possibility is to assess the feasibility of a matrix or projectized (pure) structure. A matrix as described in detail elsewhere (Graham and Englund 2004) is a combination of functional and projectized structure where lead PMs have more autonomy and less autonomy respectively. A matrix structure requires close cooperation of two sides to meet organization objectives. In reality, Graham and Englund (2004) argue that conflicts often arise over the best use of resources, which too often must be resolved on the fly by the individual in the middle of the matrix who reports to two bosses in two organizations. The need for EMB executives to debate issues before deciding on what to adopt and how far to adjust from a typical structure to an appropriate structure (hybrid).

It is important to note that ultimately EMB upper managers need to prioritize their time and craft the appropriate organization structure. The best tools they have to make it happen are to set high ideals, appreciate strengths that exist in the EMB, and share the vision.

(e) Develop a Project Management Information System

Traditionally, especially before the advent of modern computers, control of information was power. In EMBs, a few Senior managers had the total picture of projects in the EMB's books, kept it to themselves, and told others what to do. Middle and junior PMs were not to make decisions; they did not know the possible effect on the total system with the EMB. Instead they followed orders, and the integrating mechanism ensured that the totality of actions resulted in a final EMB service. In this situation (Graham and Englund 2004), the only information an individual PM needs is about the individual job. But this can work only in repeat work which is primarily not the case in most PM work as every project is unique.

In most projects, sharing of information is power. When a team of PMs is doing something new (for example), individual PMs should be empowered to make decisions, and they should be informed decisions. People making decisions need to know the decisions others have made, and know the effect of their decisions on others on the project and on other projects within the EMB.
EMBs project managers (especially in countries where elections abnormally bring a tense environment) tend to make mistakes in times of anxiety, but with sufficient time and information, they can usually make good decisions. Typically, projects are tight on time; if information is in short supply as well, good decision making is unlikely. Even without much time, having sufficient and timely information can hold down the anxiety.

The issue for EMB principals (upper managers) is thus to ensure that PMs and administrative staff know and understand the uses for the information in the system. But if one of the uses is resource allocation, which ultimately reflects on project management success, there will likely be much fudging of the input data to make each project look as if it needs many more resources. The EMB upper managers need to set up a system such that it is in everyone's best interest to supply accurate information.

All EMB upper managers need to be conscious about the impact of information on the ebb and flow of project management work. Timing is everything. There are times when magnitude may be down – progress is slower than expected – but the vector is still going in the right direction – the project team is still together and working towards the project goal. That is okay and may be the natural energy of the group for that moment, because the right work is happening, albeit slowly. A lead project PM in an EMB could mess things up if he or she pushed too hard at that time, so the advice is to *go with the flow*.

When determining the proper components of a project management information system (PMIS), first evaluate whom it will serve. EMB upper managers need the information on all projects regarding all the parameters which will have effect on project costs. PMIS software and hints for developing a PMIS are discussed in detail elsewhere (Graham and Englund 2004).

(f) Develop a Plan for Project Manager Selection and Development

Most people become EMB project managers (EMBPMs) and remain technicians. The usual path to the job is through for example expertise in human resource (HR), commerce, sociology, law, or any other technical knowledge base. When EMBs are recruiting PMs, emphasis is on technical knowledge (in HR, law, sociology, etc.) base and technical knowledge post training (coaching) in practice seem to produce a person characterized with technical arrogance – *a technical arrogant PM (TAPM)* as indicated in Figure 2(i).

$$\textbf{(i) Technical Arrogant PM} = \textbf{KB}(\textbf{T}_{NPM}) + \textbf{PT}(\textbf{T}_{NPM})$$

$$\textbf{(ii) Balanced PM} = \textbf{KB}(\textbf{T}_{NPM}) + \textbf{PT}(\textbf{T}_{NPM}) + \textbf{KB}(\textbf{P}_{PM})$$

[KB = Knowledge base; T_{NPM} = Non PM technical knowledge; PT = Practical training

TAPMs are alive and well – or at least alive; many although conceal their feelings do not feel so good about themselves or the PM job they are doing especially when involved in major electoral projects. Most EMBPMs are put in charge of sophisticated electoral projects. However, the technical say HR part of a project is often the smallest and easiest part. The technical non **PM [KB (T_{NPM}) + P (T_{NPM})]** success does not necessarily lead to project management success; it is necessary but not sufficient. EMB upper management needs to take the lead to put into place a system that selects and develops those people with the greatest potential to become balanced PMs [Figure 2(ii)].

Changing the would be PMs selection and development criteria is critical to the maturation process. It is important to aim for a balanced PM. A balanced PM [Figure 2(ii)] is an effective PM and is more than a brilliant non PM expert; there is enough evidence to suggest that technical non PM knowledge (T_{NPM}) is not paramount to being a successful PM.
According to Rwelamila (2010), the most challenging risks for a EMBPM fall under the category of behavioral risks (voters' behavioral risks and other stakeholders' behavioral risks). This category of risks has enormous implications for affecting electoral projects. The EMBPM as a single point of responsibility has a central responsibility during project planning and control phases to communicate and negotiate with various project stakeholders as part of project

management responsibilities. While technical non-PM knowledge (T_{NPM}) and skills are necessary to present requirements and they need more of the PM intelligent quotient (IQ), communication and negotiation requires the PM knowledge and skills in project social cultural issues – *the ability to listen, understand that various stakeholders have different attributes which need to be managed.* For a project PM to deal with PM issues, he or she needs to have more than IQ. He or she needs to have emotional intelligence (EI) or emotional quotient (EQ). EMB upper managers have a responsibility to establish internal systems or to use suitable external institutions to establish programmes which are entrusted with the responsibility of training recruited non-PMs to manage project social cultural issues and raising their levels of EI or EQ. By training professional non-PMs to manage project social cultural issues and raising levels of EI or EQ, EMBs will reduce the number of technical arrogant non-PMs and increase the number of balanced PMs.

The non-PM selection and development process described above probably cannot happen without direction and support of EMB upper managers. A balanced PM initiative could be formed to develop and oversee the process. Perhaps it could be assigned to an existing unit/or department, but this is not recommended unless someone very knowledgeable about balanced quantity surveying/cost engineering is in that unit/or department. The recommended approach is for a balanced PM initiative to see that the programme is properly developed, implemented, and staffed to develop a cadre of balanced PMs.

CONCLUSION

The history of democratization process in Africa has shown the strong relationship that exists between electoral processes and electoral management bodies (EMBs). That history has shown that non-project competent, partisan, bias and resource starved EMBs cannot midwife successfully important, highly delicate and complex issues like elections and electoral processes. The continent's history across a significant number of countries (e.g., Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, Ivory Coast, DRC) is abound with instances where efforts of democratization have been on the altar of badly managed electoral processes.

There is a need for a paradigm shift on African EMBs, the need to reflect on the traditional EMB, which seem to function a POO by default. This framework makes most of the EMBs inefficient and unable to fulfill their mandates. Hence the need transform the majority EMBs from current environment (non-project environment/default environment) to one in which projects are organized and used to accomplish special tasks to a full-fledged project-oriented organization

The teamwork and cross-organizational cooperation necessary for an EMB to become a fully fledged POO are antithetical to the reality experienced in most organizations. For this reason, it is a good bet that the changes that are necessary to change EMBs into true POO will be quite incompatible with the organizational change. Even if systemic change are made in the EMB, the old ways where technical arrogant of PMs rule will still be just below the surface for many EMBs organizational generations. Sustained leadership is imperative.

Culture change of EMBs is an extremely long and complicated process. It means changing the way people construct their reality. People must experience the connection between new action and performance improvement on many different occasions and over a sustained period of time. The changes must be passed on from one generation to another, and this will probably have to happen several times before the organizational culture of African EMBs adjusts to the new reality.

By implementing the six fundamental issues discussed above, balanced project management will be seen as much more than just a set of approaches to manage electoral project successfully.

Balanced electoral PM practices become totally intertwined with democratic practices across the African continent such that project management and electoral oversight are seen as the same thing. This paper provides a challenge to each person within EMBs fraternity and within every country in Africa to adopt, adapt, and address the salient issues raised in this paper.

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