

## Adoption of Project Management Practices in NGO Projects

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### Abstract:

*NGOs are a key component for societal support in every country at all times. In India too, a large number of NGOs contribute to societal needs. Managing NGO projects to meet the objectives is challenging and complex. Some NGOs adopt Project Management concepts, tools and practices, but many do not. In this qualitative study, inputs from experienced experts were collected and analysed. Open ended questions were asked to get input from actual practices prevailing in NGO projects. Conclusion of this study was also compared and contrasted with an earlier study as review of literature on, 'Adoption of Project Management in NGOs. Both the studies had convergence on many aspects on adoption of PM tools in NGO projects, such as influence on project success, governance etc. In the absence of any published data for NGOs in this region, this study becomes initial reference to take forward further research in this area.*

**Key Words:** *NGO Projects, Project Management, PM Practices*

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## 1. Introduction

Project Management is an essential skill needed for any work to be done for the first time by an organization or by a Project Team or by an individual. Many a time, work is done using concepts of project management, but unaware of having used it and it is felt as a common sense or learnt by earlier experience. However, in order to achieve the objective of the project work taken up, good understanding is essential of project management concepts, principles and tools that are utilized effectively and appropriately. In a professional or commercial organizations and Govt Depts, Project Management methods are used consciously as processes/techniques/methods, defined under regulations or guidelines. This is to bring clarity to work done and achieve the desired outcome /product at estimated/budgeted cost and time, as well as meet the beneficiaries' and donors' expectations. While the work gets completed to meet the community needs, it is relevant to see that it happens on time, and with the quality as defined, and the risks of the project are anticipated and plans for mitigating of the same was chalked out during the execution phase.

This paper presents an empirical investigation of the current practice of adopting Project Management Practices in NGO Projects in the region of Karnataka/India, based on the recommendations and opinions by experts interviewed. Focussed interviews were conducted with eleven experts who were associated with NGOs in different segments. The basis for this qualitative research is driven by earlier published systematic review of the literature and conceptual model titled "Adoption of Project Management Practices in NGO Projects- A Systematic Review of the Literature" (Jayaram & Bhatta, 2022).

Based on the earlier published work of Systematic Review of Literature available for various geographic regions, the research questions have been formulated.

It was also observed that there is evidence of the complexity of a typical NGO project due to various associated factors and uncertainties that are embedded in such environments. Very little NGO project management information about completed project has been published in the journals available in public domain focused on regions of Karnataka/India.

The literature study did not reveal about use of Project Management concepts by NGOs in the region. This paper is a step forward to the understanding of ground realities by using inputs from experts who are well-associated with NGO projects in the area/ region.

This paper flow is designed to answer the research questions (RQs) formulated and collated responses from the experts, for each question. The following are the research questions considered:

RQ1. How well NGOs are currently using Project Management concepts, tools, and techniques in NGO Projects?

RQ2. What are the factors of Project Management Practices, that have a significant impact on project success/ failures in NGO Projects?

RQ3. What methodology guides the NGO Project Manager/ in-charge, as to how and what aspects of Project Management concepts, and processes are to be adopted for Project taken up by NGO?

RQ4. How well an NGO Project carries out structured stakeholder management so as to define project deliverables and measures to assess NGO project success?

RQ5. How often do NGOs Review the project progress based on project Management Practices/ methods adopted?

RQ6. What are the common Project Management tools and techniques adopted by NGO Projects and shared, creating opportunities for innovation in the domain of NGO project management?

These research questions are answered by analysing the inputs received from extensive interviews done with select eleven experts who have considerable years of experience in managing or being part of various NGOs (Appendix-1).

This qualitative research to be considered as exploratory as we did not have any prior published reference about project management adoption in this area, nor any data is available in the public domain. The questions asked to experts were open-ended. In the next section, inputs gathered from experts' interviews are summarised and presented for each of the research questions.

## 2. Methodology

This qualitative research was aimed to understand the status of adoption project management by NGOs in this region based on the experts' inputs. The experts selected were with good professional expertise and also have experience in overseeing many NGO Projects and guiding in leadership roles for considerable time in Karnataka / India. The experts were interviewed individually and given open-ended questions from the research questions formulated earlier. The experts who accepted for interview gave adequate time for the session.

### 2.1. Interview Process:

The interview with experts was conducted using the following steps:

- Preparing a set of open-ended questions to experts based on a Systematic review of the literature done earlier.
- Validating the open-ended questions with a review from a few experienced researchers and modifying the questionnaire based on feedback received.
- Conducting a pilot interview to verify the appropriateness of the questionnaire and making necessary modifications to open-ended questions based on the pilot feedback analysis.
- Conducting semi-structured interviews of the experts and documenting the responses
- Transcripts of the interviews were analysed and tagged to identify similarities and differences expressed during the interview. In some cases, specific clarification was sought to get clarity of experts input
- Extracting similarities and contrarian views and exploring the patterns and insights that emerge from the responses and presenting the same through this paper.

2.2. Tabulated the inputs from each of the experts corresponding to Project Management practices expected to be adopted by NGOs, considering the basic structure and complexity experienced generally in projects.

## 3. Related Review of Literature

The use of Project Management concepts in India, like in many other countries vary considerably

according to the size of the NGO, the culture of the NGO, the functioning pattern, the volunteers' profile & skill level, the local environment of the beneficiary, and many other factors. A research study conducted on the adoption of Project management in Social Projects in India indicates that structured Project Management approach provided by the government helps to adopt it as a "Project Management framework", in NGO Projects (Ahuja, V, et. al., 2017). In another study (Dahie, et, al., 2017), it was found that there are positive effects in using project management practices but, the number of projects using the methodologies were very less. The adoption of many tools in an NGO project will depend on the Project Manager's exposure in addition to the financial support and exposure of the project execution team to the tools. The study also highlighted the need for use of project management tools for international aided development projects or development cooperation projects.

Project Governance has been a challenge amongst many NGOs for managing projects. A research study by Fiona Levie et. al., (2016) observed a lack of coordination and inadequate response in a major disaster response project. In many humanitarian projects due to the very nature of project complexity and minimal lead time to respond, effective governance in such projects is essential. The research concluded by highlighting the importance of a systematic approach to project governance in NGO projects. Anil Kumar et. al., (2021) study on reconstruction projects in the disaster recovery phase, attributed project success to a considerable extent to the adoption of project management practices. The project used stakeholder management and

project implementation process as there was an institutional mechanism in the NGO work approach.

Adoption of Project management tools in NGO projects is beneficial irrespective of the characteristics of the project (Ruggero Golini et.al., 2014). Based on the NGO culture, focus and other environmental factors, a project must choose the right set of tools.

Evaluation of project management practices in social enterprise projects, larger-size companies were found using concepts of project management and tools (Klara et. al., 2018). The study revealed that social enterprises use more traditional tools in project management rather than sophisticated or modern tools. It was recommended that a different version of the project management framework/ method be required considering the project environment where NGOs get involved.

It is likely, that there will be the influence of an NGO culture and approach to the project that determines the deployment of project management concepts and tools in their projects (Higgs & Smith 2003).

Anderson and Lannon (2018) study indicated that the existing Project Management System and the Quality System are not effective in NGO projects.

Project Management adoption in NGO projects helps in defining better project communication and good understanding of the project language contributing towards project success (Bannerman, 2008). Project management success needs to be defined in a multilevel framework. Local NGOs do grapple with many

challenges both within the organization and externally more so at the beneficiary location in executing projects (Rehema, 2015). Adopting of project management practices can help project staff and also stakeholders. The study indicated that adopting project management would benefit design considerations for sustainability focus and resource availability for the NGO project.

Connecting with project beneficiaries is not an independent entity. A study by Nandita (2021) concluded that it depends on NGO organization policies, culture, and project characteristics. Govt organizations and NGOs need to have links with the beneficiaries, but it is found to be very limited.

In order to handle International Projects by NGOs, specific methodologies have been developed. Project Lifecycle Management (PCM) and Logical Framework as a tool are generally used (Ruggero et. al., 2016). This research concluded that depending on the project manager's skill in the tools will enhance the possibility of usage in the project.

An analysis by Matos,P.V. et.al., (2019) on the use of project management tools by non-governmental development organizations did not observe any significant impact on the project performance. It showed that a good knowledge of the complexity of the project management of an NGDO is essential for good project performance. Different combinations of methodologies and tools of project management are the attributes that drive a project outcome.

The review of related literature mentioned above, indicate that the strategies developed

by the NGO managers are consistent with the existing literature on project management. However, not all managers have the same level of confidence in demonstrating the competencies of (a) knowledge of the environment; (b) evidence-informed decision making; and (c) interpersonal, communication qualities and relationship management.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Adoption of Project management Practices

RQ1. How Well NGOs are currently using Project Management Concepts, tools, and techniques in NGO Projects?

The interview sessions began with this question. Many of the experts clearly indicated that the use of Project Management concepts and tools in NGOs in India needs to get enhanced. A consolidated view based on the expert's interviews is summarised below :

- a. Most medium and small NGOs do not use any structured project management concepts or tools.
- b. Depending on the type of people managing the NGO and their past corporate work experience/ background, the use of many aspects of Project Management Practices effectively, can be observed.
- c. CSR funding projects which are now in trend, use many aspects of the project management concepts to meet the criteria stipulated by the funding corporates.
- d. Passion to provide service or help drives many individuals working on NGO operations or funding their projects. In

such situations, the Benefactor insists on the way to execute the Project.

- e. Many NGOs are being managed by those who had worked in the corporate/public sector and joined NGO as volunteers/staff. They do adopt many aspects of Project Management in the NGO projects with minimal functions or modifications at times, using the knowledge and experience gained in the corporate world or other areas of their professional service.

#### **4.2. Factors Impacting Project Success/Failure**

RQ2. What are the factors that have a significant impact on Project Management Practices, on Project Success / failures in NGO Projects? The interview with experts brought out the complexity of a typical NGO Project and mainly due to inherent. Some of the experts opined that culture setup in the NGO has a great influence on the Project Management Practices and tools used in Project execution.

Some of the other factors brought out during interviews that is likely to have a high impact on NGO projects are summarised:

- a. Clarity of outcome from the solution defined and feasibility of the project completion in the given environment, needs focus in the project conceptualization stage.
- b. Correct design of the solution, with cost, time, the quality defined are essential for, estimation, and tracking process besides Role Responsibility assignment essential.
- c. Availability of skilled Human resources for the project and scaling to the requirement is a key factor for project success.

- d. Capability for Vendor /Consultant management expertise is required as most NGOs may not have the required skill for a Project undertaken, and this would be critical in accomplishing the project outcome as desired.
- e. Use of Project Management techniques and tools as appropriate to the complexity of a project will enhance the success factor.
- f. Regular review of the project at the appropriate level by the NGO Management/ Project Steering team and with effective tracking of the directions and decisions of the review panel.

#### **4.3. Methodology Adopted in Projects**

RQ3. What methodology guides the NGO project in charge, and how and what aspects of Project Management to be adopted for Project taken up by NGO.

During the interviews with experts, most of the experts indicated that there is no one broad methodology adopted for the execution of NGO projects. Due to the varied nature of the projects NGOs handle and also in small and medium size NGOs the volunteers who need to execute the projects do change from each project.

- a. Most of the NGOs, particularly small and medium size would not have any predefined methodology or process.
- b. Based on available human resources, NGO assigns the Project lead role and their experience and then the approach for project execution gets evolved.

- c. With corporate funding increasing as CSR projects and also in the case of Govt funded NGO projects, defining methodology/process prior to Project Execution is coming into practice in many NGOs.
- d. Many NGOs are now hiring experienced Project Management consultants for specific projects that are from CSR or specific funding by Govt which adopts standard elements of Project Management

#### 4.4. Stakeholder Management

RQ4. How an NGO Project carries out structured stakeholder management, define project deliverables, and measures to assess NGO project success?

In NGO Projects the stakeholders are diverse and represents different organisations sectors/communities. Also, many a time large in numbers and include beneficiaries as well as benefactors. At times the location of beneficiaries is not reachable quickly, say due to natural calamity or short notice time for action. Also, in many projects such as relief to a particular community in distress, etc, the project gets into action with the assumption about the need of the community.

- a. Most NGOs (medium and small sizes) do not do good stakeholder management or beneficiaries management.
- b. Funding agency or the donor has a higher influence in defining the outcome and also the method to achieve the project objective.
- c. CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) funded projects are changing the trend towards the use of many project management concepts/tools and

techniques including stakeholders being part of project communication.

- d. During the Solution design stage for the project, many of the projects do not take cognizance to do structured stakeholder management and clarity of deliverables to the beneficiary.
- e. Deliverables (Outcomes), where a certain quantity of items are required/delivered, is done to a large extent (like notebooks for school, computer lab, TAB with software loaded, etc) with minimal stakeholder management. But when the deliverables are not easily measurable (like empowerment, rights, education, hygiene humanitarian aid, rural development, conservation, etc) it is done to some extent in an unstructured approach.

#### 4.5. Project Reviews

RQ5. How often do NGOs Review the project progress based on project Management Practices adopted?

The core of NGO as an institution is by the volunteers who contribute their time and effort. Many volunteers likely to have another regular job/profession for which they are engaged. There is a higher amount of uncertainty of resources when smaller NGOs take up the project, in many cases. However medium and larger size NGOs do have some regular staff available as manpower for work on the project and also for tracking the project progress or reviewing the project progress periodically. It was mentioned by all the experts that financial monitoring is done very regularly and effectively by NGOs.

- a. Project Review by NGO happens with financial control as the focus.
- b. NGO management review of the entire project depends on the donor or funding agency and generally more informally.
- c. Most NGOs don't have a dashboard and reporting at regular intervals excluding CSR-funded projects, where some regular status report is mandated.
- c. There are some NGOs as exceptions, but they use some of the regular Project Management tools and few adopt duly modified.

#### 4.7. Project Governance

RQ7. What are the Project Governance methods adopted by NGOs in their projects?

Most experts barring two of them indicated that the governance methods adopted were more towards financial control in most Projects of small and medium NGOs. Two of the experts indicated that there is project governance defined as a part of the contract being given to the NGO. In the case of NGO self-funded projects, informal governance exists to some extent. Project governance also varies with individual NGO cultures and there is no standard prescribed except for the compliance needs stipulated by the Govt.

#### 4.8. PMO (Project Management Office)

RQ8. Do NGOs have PMO (Project Management Office) setup for supporting their projects?

The experts were of the opinion that NGOs do not use the concept of a PMO due to multiple reasons. However, two of the experts indicated that some of the medium to large NGOs are now in the process of setting the PMO for enabling higher Project efficiency and capacity building.

#### 4.9. Publication

RQ9. Do NGOs Publish about Projects executed in journals and other media for sharing knowledge?

NGOs in India or in this region do not have a good record of publishing articles based on project execution details or on project management techniques adhered explicitly in the projects.

#### 4.6. PM Tools and Techniques?

RQ6. What are the common Project Management (PM) tools and techniques adopted by NGO Projects and shared, creating opportunities for innovation in the domain of NGO project management?

Many smaller size NGOs use very basic tools for storing data or communicating. Also, the volunteers who lead projects may or may not be familiar with the PM tools being planned for using if available and also the availability of time to familiarise themselves and use the tools effectively.

Summary based on the gist of all the interviews done with respect use of tools and techniques in NGO projects are listed below:

- a. Hardly any older NGOs, particularly medium and small NGOs attempt to use technology or tools.
- b. XL sheet, Logical framework, planning templates, Gantt Charts, and a few MS office tools are used by a few relatively newer NGOs depending on the knowledge of the leadership on Project Management tools.



- a. Generally small and medium NGOs do not publish any articles in journals or magazines. At most they prepare a report and submit to the donor and NGO management.
- b. Main reason is the lack of adequate staff and hence essential aspects like finance/accounting are documented. Inexperienced staff is also a reason quoted by experts to do project documentation and publish.
- c. CSR-funded projects, many prescribing some specific reports and documentation are available if NGO focuses on formulating project-based articles.

## 5. Discussion

The qualitative analysis based on interviews with experts confirmed many perceptions about the use of project management concepts, tools, and techniques in NGO projects in Karnataka/India. Many experts stated that there is a positive trend, towards increase in the usage of project management principles and tools/techniques, particularly where CSR projects are being taken up by the NGOs. Also, in NGOs where younger generation/corporate experienced volunteers are involved and in the new NGOs, there is a noticeable level of usage of project management techniques/ tools and concepts in projects.

5.1 Inherent complexity and uncertainty: Most NGOs experience uncertainty in getting sponsors' decision as well as complexity due to other factors associated with the purpose of the project. It is observed that many small or medium size NGOs focus on the service to be undertaken and that overrides the need to adopt a structured

approach in execution or implementation. The research indicated that the availability of essential / suitable PM skill within the NGO, for the project work to be assigned becomes a key limitation.

Smaller and medium size NGOs, are most likely to have fewer volunteers and amongst them, who have project management exposure and domain knowledge. Also in these situations, the Project is assigned based on who is ready to take up the urgent task or to someone based on reference of the past work done, or work being done elsewhere. Research also revealed that many NGOs do undertake some projects of short duration say even for one-day duration too, and such is the flexibility required with respect to NGO for taking its Projects to meet the NGO objectives.

5.2 Complexity and Success Factors: Typically, most NGO projects have inherent complexity built along with uncertainty. Hence, there are no single or definite factors that can be attributed to Project success or failure without getting the context, nature of work, and environment. The experts indicated that many small and medium NGOs have been set up in the time frame of the past three or four decades, may follow their own methods/procedures, and may not use modern tools or techniques. These will have a set of success factors based on the functioning adopted by the NGO. Whereas the success factors would be completely different for newer NGOs set up by the younger generation who are more likely open to changes and adopt alternate methods to achieve the objectives. Clarity

of outcome from the project and the alignment to beneficiary needs become the common critical factors for Project success. Also, the correct design of the solution before the project plan is approved or execution is commenced is yet another key factor for the project's success/failure.

- 5.3 Use of Project Management concepts: The experts interaction revealed that while small and medium size NGOs do use some form of project management, principles /techniques, but in an unorthodox way and would not be using the professional methods and terminologies that are predominant in the corporate world. One of the biggest hurdles in knowledge transfer amongst the NGOs, particularly medium and small NGOs is the lack of documentation about the project planning, execution, monitoring, and evaluation as well project closure. Regarding the success and failure of NGOs, projects don't document formally nor published. It appears for many projects the sustainability of the outcome is not taken into account during design of project solution.
- 5.4 Monitoring and Evaluation of Projects: Most interviewers concurred with the tracking and monitoring of financial aspects with constant follow-up. However other concepts like formal risk management, vendor management or change management are not carried out in a structured way in most small and medium NGO projects. Given the availability of skilled human resources in small and medium NGOs, this appears to be the current state. With the growing number of CSR-funded projects in India, corporates

are beginning to monitor the projects and evaluate the outcome. This trend of CSR-funded NGO projects would help in adopting many corporate practices to manage projects and also a documentation with clearly defined timelines and deliverables.

- 5.5 Use of Project Management Tools: Many NGOs, that are too small and medium size do not use any tools or use basic tools. While Excel spreadsheet is used by some of the NGOs, larger size NGOs do use Gantt Charts and MS office tools, mostly where the funding or the CSR organization insists on it or as a part of the contract. There are exceptions where NGOs use software-customized project management.
- 5.6 PMO (Project Management Office) and Project Governance: The experts opined that in a structured manner, PMO setup does not exist in most NGO. However, some of the medium size NGOs do have informal and loose structured forms of NGO and not defined in the organization structure. Many times, as volunteers withdraw after a period of time due to various reasons, much valuable knowledge of managing the project is lost. Also, very few NGOs have a Project Governance Structure established. Most of the time, a nominated member of the board of trustees/management is asked to take care of the project governance.

Pie charts depicting critical factors emerged from and complexities that emerged from the experts' interview analysis:

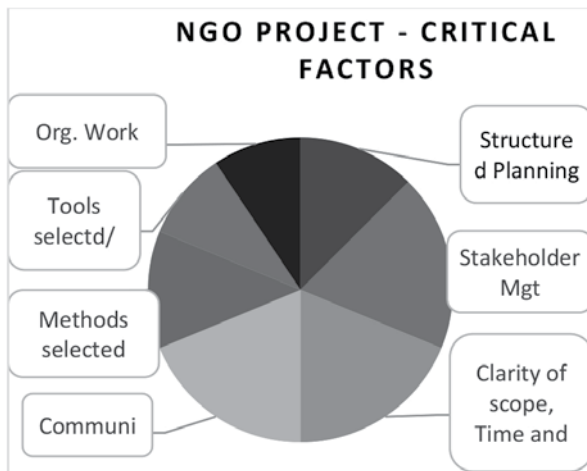


Diagram -1

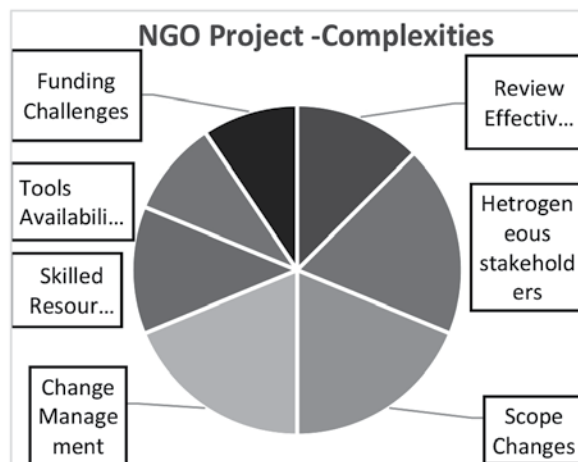


Diagram -2

Diagram 1 and 2 - summary from Experts interacted.  
Diagram developed Jayaram BG, 2023.

## 6. Analysis with Systematic Literature Review

Result of this study by qualitative interview method is compared with the conclusion of the Systematic Literature Review on adoption of Project Management practices by NGOs.

6.1 Similarities / Patterns. A number of conclusions drawn from experts' interview does match to the conclusion drawn in the Literature Survey:

Number of NGO Projects using the PM concepts, principles and practices in a

structured manner, formally are very less. (No numerical number can be assigned due to lack of published data). Literature survey indicates that there are empirical studies done showing impact of project management practices, though not from the region of this study.

Experts opined that many smaller and medium size NGOs are not likely to be adopting many aspects of PM practices in their projects. The Literature Review also showed that lower adoption of PM Practices, tools and techniques in small and medium size NGOs.

Many NGOs work informally in groups and not registered with Darpan of NITI Ayog and also the information on number of Projects undertaken / done by an NGO is not get captured. Literature review and experts input concurred that data has is not generally published by NGOs.

Lack of Project management skills amongst the NGO staff was highlighted in both the studies.

Project Governance structure adopted and practiced in NGO Projects, resulting in an impact on Project outcome has been indicated in both the studies.

Complexity in terms of typical NGO project due to various factors has been brought out in both the studies under reference.

6.2 Differences/Contradictions. There are few aspects of the study where there has been contradiction or differences and clear complimentary aspect is not expressive:

As per the literature survey, in many NGO projects had significant impact of PM

Practices adopted contributed to Project Success. In this study through experts, there no specific evidence to attribute high influence of Project management practices to project success.

In this study, specific use of PM tools by NGOs were less highlighted as compared to that indicated through Literature review, where standard Project Management tools have been used.

In this study there was no clear indication for efforts to train the Project Manager or the key team members on project management skills and techniques. The literature survey study showed that many project teams were given prior training or trained during the Project start-up phase.

In this study, influence of PMO (Project Management Office) on the NGO Projects were not indicated as no such practice is being followed, while Literature Survey study indicated many projects having established PMO and making best use of the same influencing project success.

Relationship between “Project Management (PM) success” and “Project Success” could not be established in clear terms in this study with experts, whereas the Review of literature indicated relationships them in studies.

Development of new conceptual models by NGO for managing projects have been highlighted in the Review of Literature whereas no such inputs were found in this study.

## **7. Limitations**

The limitation of this study is that there are no published reference data for any parameters published for the region of Karnataka or for India regarding NGO projects using the PM concepts. In the absence of any empirical or statistical data on the parameters of PM usage, the research questions are responded to from the inputs given by the experts’ and its analysis. This research method did not include in depth study for specific project instances on various aspects of Project Management in the NGO Project.

## **8. Future Study**

An empirical study on the parameters of each research question through case studies or surveys amongst the NGOs in the region would be the next step to validate the results of this study. Identifying most common projects in specific domain of NGO service will be greater value for enhancing NGO contribution.

## **9. Conclusion**

This paper analysed use of Project Management concepts, tools and techniques through interviews with experts who have been involved in NGO management and its Projects. The study has revealed that the research questions are valid and this area need to get a deeper understanding and also find solutions. This study with experts’ interviews mode, also validates the inferences drawn from the Literature review, conclusions in published articles, made regarding use of Project Management concepts, tools and practices. Since there are no published studies on adoption of Project management in NGO Projects in this region of Karnataka / India,

the results could be considered as that of initial studies.

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**Exhibit-1****Table # 1 Experts Experience Summary**

<b>Participant Code</b>	<b>Education degree</b>	<b>Years of work experience</b>	<b>Type of Professional work</b>
<b>Mrs Maitriee</b>	Postgraduate	40 Years	Info Technology and NGO Management
<b>Mr Rambabu Kaipa</b>	Postgraduate	38 years	IT and NGO Management
<b>Mr Vijay Paul</b>	Postgraduate	24years	IT and NGO volunteering
<b>Mr Amar Bhaskar</b>	Postgraduate	30 years	IT and NGO volunteering
<b>Mr Sampath</b>	Postgraduate	40 years	Manufacturing and NGO volunteering
<b>Mr Ravichandar</b>	Postgraduate	40 years	Management and NGO Volunteering
<b>Mr Venkatesh Murthy</b>	Engineering	37 years	IT and NGO Management
<b>Mr Ramesh Venkataraman</b>	Postgraduate	20 years	Management Gen and NGO Consulting
<b>Mr Devi Prasad</b>	Master of Phil	45 Year	Govt and NGO volunteering
<b>Mr KG Siva prasad</b>	Postgraduate	40 years	Manufacturing, IT and NGO volunteering

Note. The table represents a summary of the Experts interacted. Table developed Jayaram BG, 2023.