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Sustainability management and the success of international development projects: the role of political and social skills

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Abstract

Purpose – The objectives of this study are twofold: first, to identify the effect of sustainability management on the success of international development projects, and second, to investigate the moderating role of political and social skills on this relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopted a quantitative research methodology based on questionnaire data collected from 43 international development project managers from various fields in Burkina Faso (West Africa). Descriptive statistics and exploratory and confirmatory analyses using principal component analysis were used to assess the quality of the measurement model. A multiple regression analysis based on the partial least squares approach was used to test the hypotheses.

Findings – The results show that sustainability management positively contributes to the success of international development projects. However, given the specificities of these projects and their perception of success, the project coordinator's political and social skills do not predict a greater impact of sustainability management on the success of international development projects. The study also found that project coordinators prioritize their technical skills over behavioral ones.

Originality/value – This study fills a gap in the literature, given that little is known about the moderating role of political and social skills in the effect of sustainability management on the success of specific projects such as international development projects.

Keywords Sustainability management, International development projects, Project success, Political skills, Social skills

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Despite receiving thousands of dollars in aid, usually in the form of projects, Sub-Saharan Africa has not emerged from underdevelopment as has the Far East (Sané, 2009), which includes Botswana, Korea, Indonesia and, more recently, Mozambique and Tanzania (Radelet *et al.*, 2005). Even worse, many projects failed to achieve the desired developments and had

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negative social and environmental consequences. The project's poor performance could be explained by the lack of sustainability management, which is a set of actions and techniques that take into account socio-economic and environmental challenges when managing and creating project deliverables. Some claimed that sustainability management promotes project success by increasing stakeholder satisfaction and minimizing detrimental social and environmental impacts (Carvalho and Rabechini, 2017; Silvius and Schipper, 2015). Others mentioned that sustainability management is time- and money-consuming for the project, creates many difficulties and constraints and induces negative effects that hamper poverty reduction efforts (Hwang and Ng, 2013).

Because the coordinator is the project's focal point, the latter's competence will be critical in determining the impact of sustainability management. Many authors believe that the project manager's skills are critical to project success (Van Der Yeught, 2015). In this regard, the work of Van Der Yeught (2015) and Zaman *et al.* (2019) showed that managers' skills, especially political and social ones, influence the effect of sustainability management on project success. These skills, according to Zaman *et al.* (2019), moderate the relationship between sustainability management and project success. On the other hand, there have been studies conducted by project management experts that contradicted this claim. This is mainly the key finding of Pinto and Prescott's (1988) research, which demonstrated that managerial skills have no significant impact on project success. This debate highlights the lack of consensus on the importance of managerial skills in project success. Furthermore, researchers largely ignored the role of the project manager's political and social skills in describing project success, as evidenced by the scarcity of studies testing the role of such skills, particularly in specific projects such as development ones (Zaman *et al.*, 2019). However, in practice, the selection of managers for international development projects is mostly based on technical knowledge, professional experience or affiliation, ignoring the political and social skills deemed important for these projects' success. Nonetheless, the increase in the number of such projects and the allocated funds for them represent a major source of hope for the development of many countries.

Based on these findings, this study uses the stakeholder theory and the trait activation theory to empirically test the influence of sustainability management on the success of development projects using questionnaire data collected from a sample of 43 international development project coordinators in Burkina Faso. It also evaluates the moderating role of political and social skills in this relationship.

The study is divided into three sections. Section 1 defines the concepts and the various connections between them. Section 2 presents the research methodology, and the final section analyzes and discusses the results.

2. Conceptual and theoretical framework

This section defines the different concepts used in this study.

2.1 International development project success

Defining the success of a project is challenging, and this challenge becomes even more complex, given the unique nature of international development projects. Traditionally, the success of a project is defined by the quality of its management in terms of three criteria, time, budget and quality (Diallo and Thuillier, 2005). This traditional and mechanistic vision has been motivated by the modeling and optimization school, which only considers the technical aspects of projects (Belout, 1998). However, Baccarini (1999) demonstrated that management success is not synonymous with project success. Thus, Pinto and Slevin (1988) suggested that stakeholder satisfaction should be incorporated into the definition of project success, since

achieving the project's original goal is more important than just managing it successfully. Three factors – management, impact and visibility – are used by Diallo and Thuillier (2005) to describe a project's success in the context of international development programs.

In this study, we adopted the three-dimensional definition of Diallo and Thuillier (2005), namely, management–impact–visibility. Management refers to the manager's ability to carry out the project within the quality–time-budget constraints; the impact refers to improvement in the beneficiaries' well-being; and the visibility indicates the reputation of the project in the eyes of the stakeholders. The operating environment, safety and environmental and social sustainability are further indicators of project success (Carvalho and Rabechini, 2017; Elmezain *et al.*, 2021).

In summary, project success can be measured and interpreted in different ways because it is a subjective assessment reflecting the needs of the evaluator (Silvius and Schipper, 2015). Beneficiaries evaluate project success from an impact perspective, managers view it from a management perspective (Elmezain *et al.*, 2021) and politicians view it from a visibility perspective (Diallo and Thuillier, 2005). Consequently, the same project can be considered a failure by one group but success by another one.

2.2 Sustainability management

Management is a science, a technique and an art of managing organizations, all at the same time. It can be viewed in the context of the project as the application of talents, skills and knowledge to achieve the project goal. Management is distinct from administration, in that it searches for leadership. Management can be satisfied with technical skills, whereas management requires interpersonal skills in addition to technical ones. Sustainability is defined as the balance between socio-economic and environmental interests (Silvius and Schipper, 2015), intergenerational equity and adequate human resource management (Aarseth *et al.*, 2017).

Consequently, managing sustainability entails considering socio-economic and environmental issues while managing and producing project deliverables. Indeed, it entails considering stakeholders' needs, using environmentally friendly materials and technologies, producing environmentally friendly deliverables (Carvalho and Rabechini, 2017) and respecting intergenerational equity in the project's use of resources. In international development projects, e.g. this means considering beneficiaries and their perspectives in decision-making, adhering to environmental standards and regulations (Hwang and Ng, 2013), accounting for future generations' needs in project management and production, and training human resources and project beneficiaries in sustainability (Meng *et al.*, 2015). Sustainability management is a complex process because decisions must be made carefully and from a multi-criteria perspective, taking into account socio-economic and environmental aspects as well as multiple stakeholders. As a result, it requires specific skills.

2.3 Skill concept

According to Loufrani-Fedida (2008), there are numerous skill typologies, but researchers agree on four axes of analysis depending on whether the skills are individual, collective organizational or environmental. According to this author, individual skills, which are the subject of this study, are the capacity of an individual to mobilize and combine resources to carry out a given activity or action process. Each field of activity requires a unique set of skills. For example, many theories showed that leadership skills are becoming increasingly important in the field of management. Historically, leadership theories include the trait school, the behavioral school, the contingency school, the relational school, the visionary or charismatic school, the emotional intelligence school and the competence school (Meng *et al.*, 2015). According to the normative and positive view of project management, the skills required for any type of project, regardless of its context, fall into three categories: technical

project management skills, understanding of project specifics and behavioral skills. This viewpoint is questionable as researchers showed that specific project management skills are required (construction, technology, etc.). Meng *et al.* (2015) identified managerial, intellectual, emotional and social skills as competencies that determine sustainability in the field of infrastructure. Furthermore, the increasing complexity of projects requires the development of specific skills in project leaders. Elmezain *et al.* (2021) also demonstrated that project success is dependent on a comprehensive set of project management skills, namely, conceptual, technical, political and behavioral skills. In the same vein, Zaman *et al.* (2019) argued that behavioral skills, particularly political and social skills, are critical in development projects due to the complexities and the multitude of stakeholders with often conflicting objectives.

2.3.1 Political skills. Political behavior leads to the development of political skills (Tripathi *et al.*, 2022). It is the use of power to persuade others to achieve hidden personal goals (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977). Political behavior is viewed as personally unpleasant and detrimental to the organization when the purpose is unethical. However, these behaviors are transformed into political skills when used in the professional sphere to mobilize people around a common goal to achieve effective and sustainable results. From a professional standpoint, political skills are advantageous when they are used with high moral and ethical intentions that are free from manipulation and coercion. According to Ferris *et al.* (2005), political skills have four dimensions: social tip, networking capacity, interpersonal influence and apparent sincerity.

2.3.2 Social skills. Notari *et al.* (2014) defined social skills as the ability to understand the feelings, motives and behaviors of those around you and to motivate or persuade them to achieve a specific goal. It is the ability to collaborate and persuade others to cooperate (Ferris *et al.*, 2001). In other words, it represents, along with political skills, the ability to deal effectively with others. According to Dagot and Perié (2014), social skills, like political competencies, describe the ability of a person to interact effectively with his or her environment to achieve desired outcomes. These scholars contend that although political skills deal with the specific context of organizations and professional relationships, social skills are more broadly applicable to the area of interpersonal relations. The difference between the two concepts lies in the skill application's framework, which is important for international development projects that necessitate a higher level of social interaction and cooperation. It enables the manager to establish and maintain positive relationships with the project team members from different backgrounds (Notari *et al.*, 2014) and easily reach compromises in case of conflict.

3. Research model and hypotheses

This section presents the theoretical background used to construct the hypotheses and the research model.

3.1 Direct effect of sustainability management on project success

According to Khalifeh *et al.* (2020), the relationship between sustainability management and project success is inadequately addressed in the literature. Only five studies addressed this topic between 2013 and 2018, and none of them considered multiple stakeholders or focused on international development projects. However, the behavior and participation of individual stakeholders were identified as essential to achieving sustainability (Sabini *et al.*, 2019). According to the stakeholder theory, sustainability practices help organizations to meet stakeholder expectations and thus improve their reputation and visibility. This, in turn, allows for better management of global and financial risks. This finding was supported by both conceptual and empirical studies (Aarseth *et al.*, 2017; Carvalho and Rabechini, 2017;

Silvius and Schipper, 2015). However, Khalifeh *et al.* (2020) recommended the need for more empirical evidence before concluding. Furthermore, Brammer *et al.* (2006) stated that there is a lack of evidence of a link between sustainability actions and organizational success. In essence, Humphrey *et al.* (2012) found that sustainability actions have no costs or benefits for UK-listed organizations. Brammer *et al.* (2006) showed the absence of a link between each of the three dimensions of sustainability and organizational performance.

However, the long-term focus on sustainability can be incompatible with the temporary nature of projects. In this regard, Silvius *et al.* (2017) demonstrated that sustainability management has an impact on project costs and timelines, which can jeopardize project success. Hwang and Ng (2013) investigated green building projects and found that sustainability management, in addition to exacerbating time and cost constraints, makes planning more difficult as it requires more coordination with different stakeholders and creates more variations in design, difficulties in selecting subcontractors, uncertainties in materials and equipment required, and more unexpected circumstances at the project closure. Project sustainability actions require complex modeling, design and processes. In addition, sustainable materials cost 3%–4% more than conventional materials, and sustainable project investments cost 1%–25% more (Wilson and Tagaza, 2006). Similarly, Khalifeh *et al.* (2020) showed that sustainability management leads to additional requirements and specifications, higher overheads, more complications and pressures on project managers, practitioners and decision-makers, a higher level of expectations and increased stakeholder tensions. In the case of international development projects, managing the divergent and often conflicting stakeholder interests required for sustainability necessitates more meetings, longer decision times and consequently schedule overruns and donor dissatisfaction. Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1. Sustainability management has a direct negative effect on the success of international development projects.

3.2 Moderating role of political and social skills

According to the trait-activation theory, the performance of a project or an organization is determined by the work traits and personalities of the workers. In this regard, Belout (1998) suggested that behavioral skills, together with capital and technology, are essential to the organization's success. In this context, political and social skills are examples of behavioral skills. On a practical level, a project's objectives cannot be achieved without considering the broader social and political implications, since the lack of collaboration between stakeholders reduces worker productivity and undermines project efficacy. In the specific context of development projects, the role of political and social skills remains crucial. Indeed, behavioral skills improve project management performance and contribute to project success by reducing the risk of overrunning deadlines. In a similar vein, Loosemore *et al.* (2003) asserted that behavioral skills can be employed to address sociological problems that lead to crises and project failures. The presence of these skills is manifested in the efficient and effective use of resources, enhanced collaboration and the cohesiveness of social interactions among project team members.

Political skills have a positive impact on the personalities and other interpersonal constructs of coordinators, allowing them to achieve their goals (Ferris *et al.*, 2005). Coordinators' political skills enable them to establish and maintain social networks, which are critical for improving productivity and organizational performance (Zhan and Kim, 2015). A politically competent coordinator can provide a good work–life balance that reduces stress, increases job satisfaction and stimulates the professional commitment of the project team. As a result of their ability to manage tensions such as role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload, politically competent employees are more effective at work because they experience

less job stress. Sunindijo (2015) demonstrated that the interpersonal influence dimension improves project time performance. Elmezain *et al.* (2021) concluded that political skills are critical for the overall success of construction projects. Many researchers (Ferris *et al.*, 2005) emphasized the significance of political skills in project success.

Additionally, social skills are important for project coordinators who are responsible for interacting with at least five stakeholder groups with diverse and often conflicting interests (Sané, 2009). For example, Zaman *et al.* (2019) demonstrated that the success of a project is heavily reliant on collaboration among stakeholders, each of whom has his or her own hidden agendas, conflicting motivations or previously unresolved conflicts. The coordinator's strong social skills positively influence the interactions between the actors and stimulate the quality of the coordinator's relationship with the stakeholders (Notari *et al.*, 2014). Elmezain *et al.* (2021) identified communication and motivation as key dimensions of social skills that contribute to ensuring sustainable project practices, raising project team awareness of the process, motivating team members to achieve the objectives and maintaining the owner's and developers' ongoing commitment to the project's goal. Conversely, a lack of these skills leads to conflict, strikes, low productivity, stress and project failure. According to Zaman *et al.* (2019), projects must be led by people with social skills, because they cannot succeed without coordination, emotional intelligence, sincerity, truthfulness and integrity, whether they are organization- or individual-based. Perrini and Tencati (2006) shared this view by stating that the organization's sustainability depends on the sustainability of its relationships with its stakeholders. According to Ferris *et al.* (2001), social competencies, as a moderator, contribute to improving organizational overall performance. Thus, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H2. Political skills will weaken the negative relationship between sustainability management and the success of international development projects.

H3. Social skills will weaken the negative relationship between sustainability management and the success of international development projects.

Figure 1 below shows the graphical representation of the conceptual model derived from the literature, illustrating the three main research hypotheses of this study.

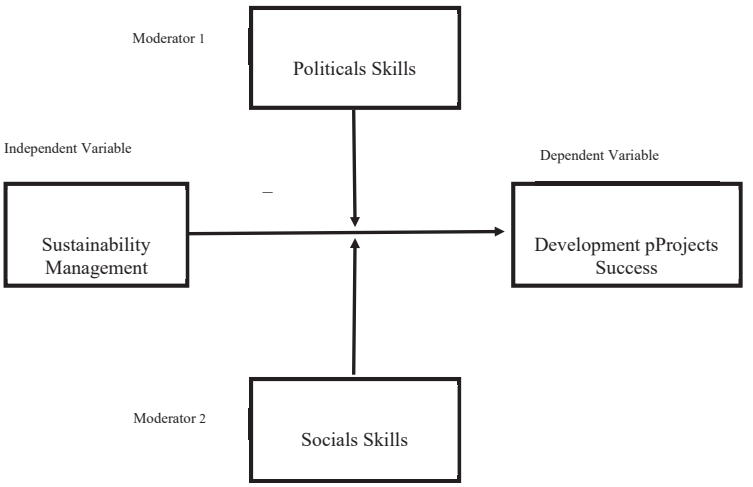

Figure 1.
Research model

4. Research methodology

This section clarifies the sampling and data collection procedure, the measures of variables and the statistical tools used for data analysis.

4.1 Sample and data collection method

This study covers international development projects implemented in several sectors (health, education, etc.) in Burkina Faso (West Africa). Primary data were collected from November 2020 to the end of February 2021. Using the convenience sampling approach, survey questionnaires were administered electronically (more than 90%) and manually to several project managers. A total of 127 questionnaires were sent; however, only 46 were completed and returned; out of which three had missing data and were discarded. The final sample, with an effective response rate of 33.86%, consists of 43 useful responses, composed of 37 men (86%) and six women (14%), with an average age of 46 years. More than 80% of the respondents have at least a postgraduate degree (DESS, Master, PhD).

4.2 Variables measurement

The measurement scale for each variable was developed after an extensive review of the existing literature.

4.2.1 Sustainability management. Given the novelty of this concept in the field of project development (Aarseth *et al.*, 2017), few scales exist to measure it. In this study, this variable is measured using 11 items based on the work of Carvalho and Rabechini (2017) and Silvius and Schipper (2015). The scale has excellent psychometric qualities as measured by Cronbach alpha (α) of 0.846.

4.2.2 Project success. Although there are several scales for measuring project success in the existing literature, few of them are related to development projects. In this study, this variable is measured using 11 items developed by Diallo and Thuillier (2005) in the African context, whose psychometric properties are very satisfactory, being 0.858.

4.2.3 Political skills. The instrument developed by Ferris *et al.* (2000) and adopted by the same authors in 2005 is widely used in the literature to measure political skills. This instrument measures political skills on four dimensions: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability and perceived sincerity. This study uses this instrument, which has excellent psychometric qualities (α = 0.724) and has been translated into French following Dagot *et al.* (2014).

4.2.4 Social skills. Social skills indicate the ability to be effective in social interaction. This study uses the instrument developed by Ferris *et al.* (2001) which consists of seven items. It has satisfactory psychometric properties with α of 0.765.

4.3 Data analysis tools

The principal component analysis (PCA) method and the partial least squares (PLS) approach were used to check the quality of the measurement instruments and test the research hypotheses, respectively. The PLS approach performs well with small-sized samples, as was the case in our study. Moreover, the technique suggested by Zaman *et al.* (2019) was used to examine the moderating effect of political and social skills on the relationship between sustainability and project success. SPSS.25.0 and Smart PLS software were employed for data analysis.

5. Presentation and discussion of the research results

This section assesses the quality of the measurement instrument and evaluates the model, followed by hypothesis testing. Subsequently, this section presents the discussion of the findings.

5.1 Common variance bias

As a rule, the common variance bias occurs when data are collected from a single source. This bias is indeed an inherent phenomenon in research involving individuals, and several techniques have been proposed in the literature to reduce its risk or check its influence. Similar to Wang *et al.* (2020), we performed the "*Harman one-factor test*" or the Harman test. More specifically, we run factor analysis on all the statements (40 items) and examined the unrotated solution to see if a single factor could explain more than half of the total variance explained. Results show that only 22.433% of the variance was explained by the first factor, while 80.646% of the variance was explained by the remaining 12 extracted factors. Therefore, we can deduce that this study is not affected by the common variance bias.

5.2 Exploratory analysis results

Exploratory factor analysis showed that the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was greater than 0.5 and Barlett's test of sphericity was significant with a p-value of 0.000. This ensures the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Thus, PCA was performed using SPSS.25.0 software, by considering the total variance explained and the Kaiser criterion, which allows us to retain only factors with eigenvalues greater than unity. This allowed us to retain a unidimensional structure for all the variables after deleting statements that are not sufficiently correlated with their corresponding factors and that have low commonalities (< 0.5). Table 2 shows that Cronbach's α coefficients and explained variances were greater than 0.7 and 60%, respectively; eigenvalues and KMOs were greater than 1 and 0.5, respectively; and Bartlett's sphericity test was significant with a p-value of 0.000. Thus, we can conclude that the measurement scales create coherent sets with satisfactory internal consistencies.

5.3 Confirmatory analysis results

Using the PLS-SEM method, the measurement model reliability and validity were assessed by the internal consistency reliability and Cronbach's alpha, the convergent validity of the measures associated with the constructs and the discriminant validity (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2019). As shown in Table 1, Cronbach's α coefficients ranged from 0.724 to 0.858, while the composite reliability coefficients ranged from 0.864 to 0.904, both exceeding the threshold of 0.7. Thus, we can conclude that the variables are reliable (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, all factor loadings ranged from 0.703 to 0.944, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.708 (Sarstedt *et al.*, 2019), and the average variance extracted (AVE) values ranged from 0.615 to 0.771, greater than the minimum value of 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Therefore, the conditions for convergent validity are satisfied. Finally, as shown in Table 1, the square roots of the diagonal AVE were greater than the correlations among the variables. Therefore, each latent construct in the measurement model is independent of the others, confirming discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

In summary, the results show that the reliability and the validity conditions of the four constructs were met. Therefore, we can proceed with the evaluation of the structural model.

5.4 The structural model result (hypothesis test)

This section presents the direct and moderating effects after verifying the presence of significant relationships among the variables. The coefficients of determination (R^2), the effect size index (also known as f or Cohen's f^2) and the path coefficient (β) were used to estimate the quality of the overall model.

5.4.1 Variables essential characteristics. Table 2 summaries the key features of the four variables in the studied model.

Constructs	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability	AVE	Eigenvalues	% of variance explained	KMO meaning of bartlett
Sustainability management							
MD_10	0.791	0.846	0.888	0.615	3.107	62.146	0.669 0.000
MD_11	0.808						
MD_4	0.763						
MD_5	0.848						
MD_9	0.703						
Political skills							
CP_10	0.807	0.724	0.870	0.771	78.358	0.500 0.000	78.358
CP_11	0.944						
Social skills							
CS_3	0.740	0.765	0.864	0.680	2.045	68.166	0.674 0.000
CS_6	0.845						
CS_7	0.883						
Project success							
SP_2	0.857	0.858	0.904	0.701	2.807	70.171	0.783 0.000
SP_3	0.820						
SP_4	0.848						
SP_1	0.823						

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity of latent variables

Constructs	Average	Standard deviation	Correlations of latent variables CP	CS	MD	MS
Political skills	4.33	0.50	1			
Social skills	3.63	0.71	*0.519***	1		
Sustainability management	4.35	0.58	*0.389***	*0.451***	1	
Project success	4.22	0.69	0.262	*0.383**	*0.552***	1

Note(s): ** and * denote significance at the 1 and 5% level

Table 2. Characteristics of variables

5.4.2 Direct effects test. The results found a significant and positive relationship between sustainability management and project success ($\beta = 0.545$, $t = 4.804$, $p = 0.000$). This result contradicts our first main hypothesis (H1), which states that sustainability management has a negative and direct impact on the success of international development projects. Furthermore, there was no significant and direct positive relationship between the two moderator variables namely political skills ($\beta = 0.023$, $t = 0.176$, $p = 0.860$) and social skills ($\beta = \ = 0.109$, $t = 0.712$, $p = 0.477$) and project success. Moreover, the R^2 value is 0.378, indicating that 37.8% of the fluctuations in project success can be explained by the independent variable and the two moderating variables. Additionally, sustainability management has a significant effect on project success (size effect (f^2) = 0.401). Thus, the tested model has a good level of predictive quality and accuracy.

It is important to note that β is the path coefficient, t is the student's t-test and p is the eigenvalue.

5.4.3 Moderating effects test. On the one hand, the first moderating factor was introduced as the product of the explanatory variable (sustainability management) and the first moderating variable (political skills). The second moderating factor, on the other hand, was introduced as the product of sustainability management and social skills. The first case presented in Figure 2 resulted in no significant relationship between political ($\beta = 0.043$,

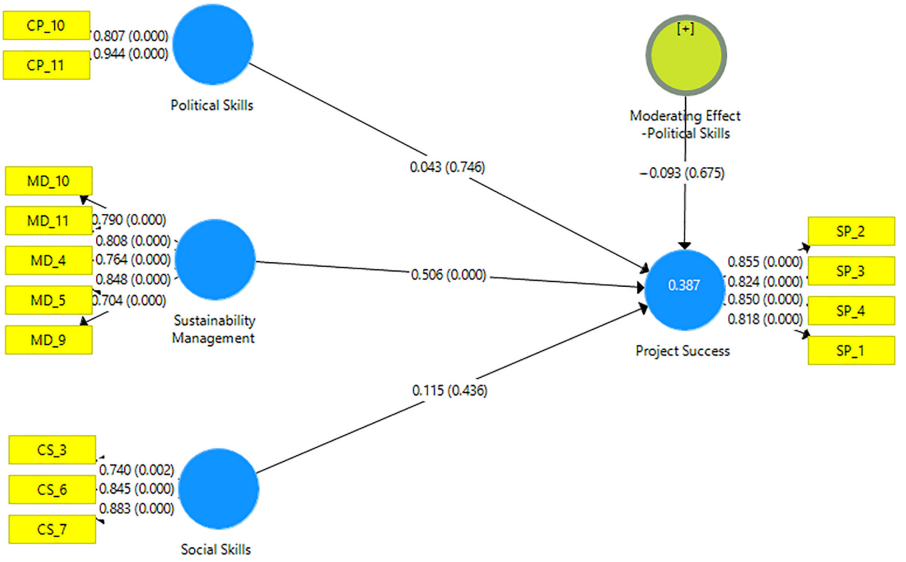

Figure 2.
Moderating effect (sustainability management * political skills)

$t = 0, 325$, $p = 0.745$), social ($\beta = 0.115$, $t = 0.784$, $p = 0.433$), interaction factor (moderator*political skills) ($\beta = –0.093$, $t = 0, 409$, $p = 0.683$) and project success. Similarly, the second case summarized in Figure 3 displayed no significant relationship between political ($\beta = 0.067$, $t = 0, 542$, $p = 0.588$), social ($\beta = 0.075$, $t = 0.523$, $p = 0.601$), interaction factor (moderator*social skills) ($\beta = –0.223$, $t = 0.906$, $p = 0.365$) and project success. As a reminder, the moderator effect is established if the coefficient of the interaction factor resulting from the combination of the moderator and independent variable is significant, and

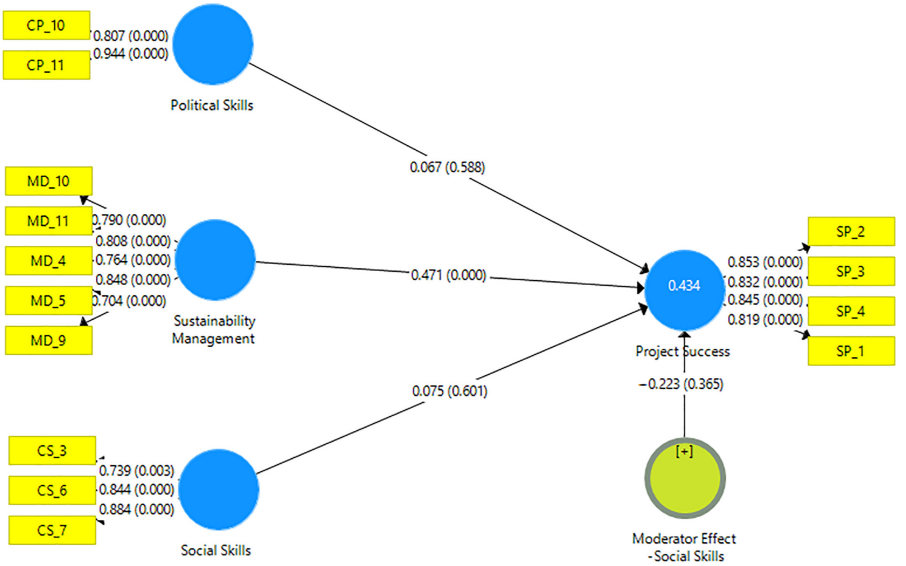

Figure 3.
Moderating effect (sustainability management * social skills)

the coefficient of determination R^2 of this regression is greater than the coefficient of determination R^2 of the regression testing the direct effect of the moderator and the independent variables on the dependent variable. Thus, based on the results, we conclude that political and social skills do not moderate the relationship between sustainable development and project success. Consequently, we reject our last two hypotheses (H2 and H3) stating that the higher the coordinator's political and social competence, the lower the negative impact of sustainability management on the success of international development projects.

In summary, Figure 2 shows that the coordinator's political skills do not affect the impact of sustainability management on the success of international development projects.

Figure 3 shows the lack of influence of social skills on the relationship between sustainability management and the success of development projects.

5.5 Discussion

Building on the work of Zaman *et al.* (2019) and other behavioral skills studies, the objective of this study was twofold: (1) investigate the impact of sustainability management on the success of international development projects and (2) explore the moderating role of political and social skills on this relationship.

First, the study found that sustainability management has a direct and positive impact on the success of international development projects. This result corroborates Carvalho and Rabechini's (2017) finding that sustainability management protects projects from many risks and generates various benefits that improve their success. In international development projects with a focus on social objectives, beneficiary participation in the project management helps to achieve the desired impact, as it promotes beneficiary commitment, contribution, knowledge, organization and control, consequently, ownership of the project outcomes at the end of funding. Furthermore, ethics, transparency, fairness and participatory management foster a comfortable social climate within the project team, shielding it from possible social conflicts and promoting the achievement of project objectives and visibility. To be successful, the project coordinator must have, in addition to technical skills, behavioral skills that enable him/her to anticipate the feelings of the beneficiaries. However, our results differ from those of Brammer *et al.* (2006) who found no link between sustainability actions and organizational performance. According to Humphrey *et al.* (2012), this could be due to the existence of opposing effects between the dimensions of sustainability management, making it difficult to ascertain the precise nature of the relationship. Additionally, our results also diverge from those of Hwang and Ng (2013) who, in turn, found a negative relationship between sustainability management and construction project success. Thus, the nature and peculiarities of the projects under consideration may explain these contradictory results (Sabini *et al.*, 2019). For instance, the impact of sustainability management on infrastructure projects may differ from that on development projects because they do not share the same specificities, needs and objectives. Indeed, these two types of projects do not have the same success criteria. Traditional projects, on one hand, are more sensitive to budget and time overruns due to their financial profit objectives, whereas development projects, on the other hand, are more responsive to the social impact of the project. Moreover, unlike traditional projects, in development projects, donors are more demanding on sustainability issues from the project's early planning phase due to the overall concern for sustainability issues. This anticipates budget and time overruns issues as well as contradictory sustainability-related implications. Also, many projects are designed to ensure the continuity of project benefits after the end of funding. This leads to unexpected events that have an impact on time, budget and quality and negatively affect the success of these projects.

Second, our results showed that political and social skills do not moderate the relationship between sustainability management and the success of international development projects. These results confirm those of Lacroux (2009) who found no moderating effect of perceived support in the relationship between perceived insecurity and organizational commitment on the one hand, and perceived fairness in the relationship between objective and perceived insecurity on the other hand. Dagot and Perié (2014) found a non-significant moderating effect of political competence on burnout. However, our results contradict those of Ferris *et al.* (2001) and Zaman *et al.* (2019) who found that political and social skills as moderators contribute to improving overall project performance. These divergent results could be explained by the nature of the studied projects. The authors' studies focused on projects with commercial objectives (construction, software industry, etc.), as opposed to international development projects with primarily social objectives. In addition, these results indicate that international development project coordinators generally prioritize their technical skills and those of the project team over understanding and perceiving others' feelings, concerns and views.

5.5.1 Theoretical contribution. From a theoretical point of view, this study sheds new light on the importance of behavioral skills in projects. While the role of behavioral skills in project success, in general, seems to be ignored in the literature, the case of specific projects such as international development projects stands out. This study fills this gap by showing that project actors place less emphasis on project coordinators' behavioral skills, making it difficult to predict the impact of political and social skills on the success of international development projects. Furthermore, the study contributes to the body of knowledge on project success factors by showing that sustainability management positively impacts the success of specific projects (i.e. international development projects).

5.5.2 Management involvement. From a practical perspective, the study highlights the importance for project-based organizations to focus more on incorporating sustainability into management practices. Therefore, policymakers should include sustainability management in all project management professionals' training programs. The study also reveals that project coordinators are less concerned with behavioral skills. Therefore, decision-makers should take advantage of this study by focusing on the behavioral skills of project coordinators and the team members, and providing them with in-depth training on soft skills. This would improve project success.

5.5.3 Limitations and future research. Assessing the impact of the coordinator's behavioral skills alone on project success seems reductive. Similarly, according to some studies (Elmezain *et al.*, 2021), the manager's behavioral skills alone do not predict project success, but rather a comprehensive set of conceptual, technical, political and behavioral skills. Thus, future studies could examine the impact of the entire project team's behavioral skills on project success, or the impact of the full set of managerial skills on the success of complex projects such as international development projects.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to examine the impact of sustainability management on the success of international development projects and explore the moderating role of the project coordinator's political and social skills. Exploratory, confirmatory and multiple regression analyses based on the PLS approach were performed on empirical data collected through an electronic questionnaire from 43 international development project coordinators in Burkina Faso. These analyses showed that sustainability management contributes positively to the success of international development projects by improving their reputation and visibility through stakeholder satisfaction and reducing negative social and environmental impacts. This is in line with the stakeholder theory. The results also show that the project coordinator's political and social skills do not predict a better effect of sustainability management on the

success of international development projects, given the specificities of these projects and their evaluation of success.

Despite the limitations of the small sample size, this study contributes to the literature and practice and opens up new avenues for future research. These contributions are relevant to the work of Carvalho and Rabechini (2017) and Zaman *et al.* (2019), which demonstrated that the role of managerial skills in project success was ignored by researchers.

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Further reading

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