

Black Elephants and... maybe Project Management¹

David L. Pells

This is my first editorial in many months. Over the last year, several people have encouraged me to start writing again, so here goes. With the May passing of my good friend and mentor Russ Archibald, I thought I might write about lessons learned (or lost), lifecycles or another one of Russ' favorite topics. But no, I had to shift gears. How could I not talk about the multiple crises affecting America (and the world). So this is about lessons not yet learned. Some of you may not like it.

From Crisis to Crisis

The Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic has been ravaging the world since January; global infections now top eight million with 400,000+ deaths. Cities have been isolated, entire countries have gone into lockdown, economic activity has stopped, and many lives have been suspended. Entire industries have slowed, business have closed, millions have lost their jobs and the virus is still spreading. While this pandemic caught a lot of people (and politicians) by surprise, it was no surprise to those who study infectious diseases, nor should it have been a surprise to most of us. Even Bill Gates predicted this exact type of pandemic in a TED Talk in 2015. (Rogers 2020)

For the last two weeks, the United States has been rocked by demonstrations and riots, following the death of a black man named George Floyd at the hands of white police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The crowds demonstrating in streets around the country in the thousands have included minorities and citizens of every age, race and background, all clamoring for better treatment by police and for more justice. The world watched in disbelief as America seemed to be disintegrating into chaos and violence. Anyone who has studied U.S. history though could not have been surprised, considering the history of racism, income inequality and social injustice in this country. It was only a matter of time until frustrations boiled over (again). 'Black lives matter' has now become a rallying cry in many other countries.

And now the Atlantic hurricane season has started, with its third storm named two months earlier than last year. This is predicted to be another active hurricane season with major storms expected to hit the U.S. gulf coast and southeastern states. Another hurricane Katrina or Harvey may only be weeks away. Another natural disaster during the pandemic could be devastating. That said, two major cyclones have already hit the coasts of India this year, with more expected. Climate change is causing more extreme weather events everywhere.

How has the project management professional world reacted to these events and crises? How do disasters and 'events of scale' affect projects and project management? What should we be thinking or, more importantly, doing in response? In response to the pandemic, the project management institute and other PM organizations seem to have simply retreated into "virtual mode", working from home and conducting activities and events online, just like most

¹ How to cite this paper: Pells, D.L. (2020). Black Elephants and maybe Project Management; *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue VI, June.

organizations in countries hard-hit by the virus. There seem to have been no policy changes, few guidelines issued, no new 'projects' launched to address project management in this new normal of social distancing, suspended supply chains, disrupted industries and project managers out of work.

For many years I have felt, and written about, project management for disaster response and recovery. It's been clear to me that many natural disasters can be predicted with plans needed for responding quickly. I delivered a keynote presentation to the PM South Africa conference in 2010 titled "Disruptive Events: Are you, your project or organization prepared?" As I pointed out to the audience, if you live near the coast, any coast, you should expect storms, some of them life threatening. If you live in a flood zone, expect floods. If you live in Tornado Alley, as we do in Texas, expect tornadoes. If there is drought, expect fires. And if you live anywhere on the 'Ring of Fire', you can expect earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis and storms. Buildings, infrastructure and other assets get old, wear out, start to fail or become more susceptible. In dense populations, diseases spread. Pick an industry or location; disasters do and most likely will happen.

Project Managers are and should be at the forefront of those responses. But where is the PM professional world? PMI has published several good papers about PM for emergencies or post disaster response, presented at global congresses. (Bau, et al 2008, Sterling 2008). PMI also has some useful information and videos related to volunteering on its website (PMI 2020). A recent paper on govexecutive.com by two PMI executives on how project management can support recovery from the Covid-19 crisis is also interesting (Townsend 2020).

The Association for Project Management (APM) in the UK has published several reports, papers and articles about PM for emergencies and specifically related to responding to climate change. Perhaps the most significant was the white paper by Prof Peter Morris on what the PM world might do to combat the effects of climate change. (Morris 2017). In 2019, the UK Parliament declared an environment and climate change emergency. In response, APM published a policy statement: "Our statement on climate change" (APM 2019a) in which they outlined five active steps APM planned to take. In late 2019, APM published their second "Projecting the Future" white paper titled "Climate Change, Clean Growth and Sustainability." (APM 2019b) Rob Leslie-Carter, an Arup director based in London, authored a very useful paper in late 2019 on concrete actions project managers can take to help combat climate change (Leslie-Carter 2019). In March of this year, APM announced that it was joining forces with 27 other professional bodies in pledging to tackle climate change. (APM 2020).

I searched Google on the topics of project management for emergencies, disaster recovery, climate change and some related topics and found very little coming from professional bodies. About PM helping solve other global problems, almost nothing. IPMA has some interesting semi-related articles posted on their blog page (Coemans 2020, Ram 2020) and their two most recent world congresses have focused on Sustainability (Mexico 2019) and health (Iran 2018). IPMA's recent GlobalPMDays virtual event in May included presentations on related topics such as sustainability, crisis management, wather resilience and others. IPMA has also established SIGs for Smart Cities, Smart Rural and several others that look promising. It seems they may be moving in the right direction.

It's true that APM, IPMA, PMI and other professional bodies have recognized projects and project mangers in the social and NGO sectors, through their awards programs. So that is

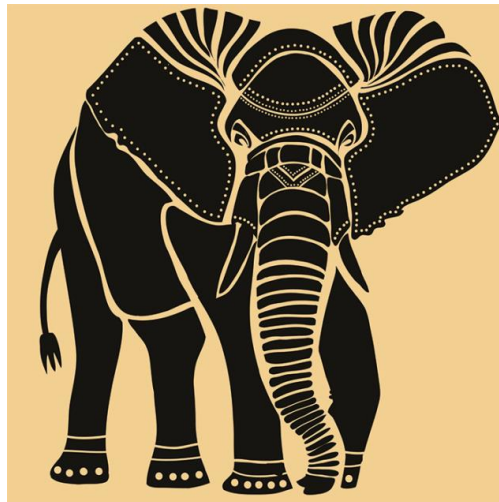
positive. In addition, [GPM](#) (Green Project Management) has established a robust set of standards and certifications associated with sustainability and environmental topics, while [PM4NGOs](#) has done the same for the international development sector. I think the most significant recent initiative related to involving the PM professional world in solving global problems is the international research programme “Capabilities for delivering projects in the context of societal development (CaProSoc)” initiated in 2019 by Prof. Dr. Mladen Radujkovic and Reinhard Wagner (current IPMA chair) through the Alma Mater Europaea (AME). AME is an international university based in Salzburg (Austria), with campuses in several European cities. AME was founded as an initiative by the European Academy of Sciences and Arts. In 2017, a Doctoral Study Programme »Project Management« was started at the campus in Maribor (Slovenia). The study programme prepares students to think and act strategically, making positive contributions to the society through project management. (Wagner 2020)

I have personally authored some papers on these topics over the years – see the Pells papers (1994, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2017, 2018) in the list of references below. Please note the mission statement on page 4 of the Project Earth Revisited paper (Pells 2008). Bob Prieto has also written significant papers about response to and recovery from events of scale such as natural disasters (Prieto 2010), black swan risks (Prieto 2011), post-disaster engineering and construction (Prieto 2013), and many other articles, papers and books on project and program management in the engineering and construction industries, many of which are relevant to this discussion. Other authors, researchers and experts in industries and professions outside the project management field have also written on these topics.

But it seems to me that little is happening in the PM profession, which seems to be moving slowly if at all on so many global problems. Is the subject of climate change just too big? What about all the other big problems facing the world, where solutions will require big projects and programs and where project management would obviously be so helpful and important. Do we really understand the issues, the needs, the consequences of not acting? I’ve been thinking about these things for a long time. What was I missing?

Enter the Black Elephant

Then I read an article by Tom Friedman, Pulitzer prize-winning author (as correspondent and of such books as *The Earth is Flat and Hot, Flat and Crowded*) and commentator for the New York Times on Sunday, June 3rd, 2020 (Friedman 2020). His article introduced me to **Black Elephants** and the light bulb flashed on. I did some quick research, found another editorial by Friedman on the topic (Friedman 2014) and a few other extremely interesting and relevant articles, but only a few. It seems this whole concept is really new. I’ve never read or heard of anyone in the project management community mentioning black elephants.



The term Black Elephant was apparently coined in 2010 in a meeting in the UK between two change agents, Dougald Hine and Vinay Gupta. Here is what I found.

“Friedman noted the use of the term ‘black elephant,’ which is a cross between “a black swan” (an unlikely, unexpected event with enormous ramifications) and the “elephant in the room” (a problem that is visible to everyone, yet no one still wants to address it) even though we know that one day it will have vast, black-swan-like consequences. He was quoting investor and environmentalist Adam Sweidan, who said, “there are a herd of environmental black elephants gathering out there” — global warming, deforestation, ocean acidification, mass extinction and massive freshwater pollution. ‘When they hit, we’ll claim they were black swans no one could have predicted, but, in fact, they are black elephants, very visible right now.’” (York. 2014)

“The Black Elephant is an unholy union of two boardroom clichés: the Elephant in the Room, the thing which everyone knows is important, but no one will talk about; and the Black Swan, the hard-to-predict event which is outside the realm of normal expectations, but has enormous impact. The Black Elephant is an event which was quite foreseeable, which was in fact an Elephant in the Room, but which, after it happens, everyone will try to pass off as a Black Swan. We think we have spotted a few of these.” (Hine 2010)

“Brexit is Britain’s Black Elephant. It’s been lumbering about for years now and is about to break down the door and smash the place up. As Roger Cohen writes this could have devastating consequences including the failure of the euro and subsequent financial turmoil, political destabilisation from increased disunity over the refugee crisis which would greatly benefit the far-right in France and England and opportunity for Putin’s Russia to threaten further in the Baltics.” (Small 2016)

“Are companies factoring the core dynamics behind these issues into business planning? It is essential that companies consider key questions related to today’s context, such as:

- *Are we rapidly transitioning to low-carbon, greenhouse gas emissions and considering [business in a climate-constrained world](#), throughout our companies and supply chains? And are we focused on investing in the changes needed to*

address core drivers of climate change, within our company and across the private sector, such as those laid out by the [IPCC](#) and [We Mean Business Coalition](#)?

- *Have we conducted a [water risk assessment](#) for our facilities and supply chain, to understand our companies' water needs within the context of total watershed- or basin-level water demand and supply? How are we [identifying water risks](#) that we need to avoid or mitigate, as well as opportunities?*
- *Have we assessed biodiversity loss as it affects ecosystem structure and function, particularly related to projected future water flows, recharge rates of aquifers, buffering against storms and floods, saltwater intrusion into freshwater, and other such issues?*
- *Have we assessed local income and community ability to access essential elements to meet their basic human needs, such as water, shelter, food and other elements outlined in the [UN Declaration on Human Rights](#)?*

And yet, are companies factoring these issues into their decisions? Are spreadsheets and PowerPoint slide summaries of corporate strategy calling out risks and opportunities related to water, biodiversity, ecosystem structure and function, as well as socioeconomic gaps, alongside traditional business measures?"

Omitting these issues in corporate decision-making is akin to managing by magnifying glass, without picking one's head up to look at the broader context. Business is operating in a climate-constrained world, marked by water issues, biodiversity loss, socioeconomic chasms. These issues are all key to the business context, and therefore business success or failure."

We live in an era — as Thomas Friedman referred to and Dougald Hine [described](#) — of "[stampeding black elephants](#)." The context in which we conduct business has enormous, well-known issues that relatively few are seriously discussing (elephants in the room), with significant potential impacts from events that are difficult to predict (black swans). Uncertainty and magnitude of risk sit side-by-side, with inadequate strategic discussion about — or action on — either. Relatively few businesses factor key elements of this context into decision-making." (Sissel 2015)

The current coronavirus pandemic is a black elephant. Climate change is a black elephant. The social unrest rocking the United States, UK and even Australia now is based on several black elephants, including income inequality, social injustice (including unequal policing), poverty and racism; it was just a matter of time until those pots began to blow. The black elephants are stampeding and we can all see them. In fact, I could argue that most of the UN's sustainable development goals (previously the millennium development goals) address looming (charging) black elephants. Consider the social and environmental problems that we have highlighted in the PMWL at <https://peworldlibrary.net/solving-global-problems/>

So what...?

It seems to me that these questions and issues are relevant to projects and project management, in multiple ways. First and most obviously, from a risk management perspective, black elephants are bigger and potentially more significant than nearly any other

risk. They represent existential threats – as the Covid-19 pandemic is clearly demonstrating. They can devastate resources, supply chains, human communities, markets, businesses, economies, stakeholders of every kind, environments. How many project, program or organizational risk management plans take black elephants into account?

For major projects and programs, the issue is more serious. For any mega project or program lasting 5, 10 or 20 years, the probability of serious crises with potential widespread impacts increases dramatically. The next 20 years are expected to see political and economic turmoil in America, Europe and globally. Supply chains and stakeholders will be affected, some totally uprooted. There will be changes, some will be significant, and many are accelerating. Many will be due to black elephants that are already visible.

Sustainability is important in an energy dependent world and to combat climate change. But in a world of black elephants, resilience is more critical. Just as with any major system, resilience is critical for project, program and organizational survival. Backups are needed (for all critical components, positions and processes); contingency plans must exist; emergency response and recovery plans prepared; business continuity and transition plans considered. It's true for projects, programs and organizations, just as it is for cities, countries and society at large. Much more education is needed, along with action.

Project models, templates and examples for addressing black elephants are needed. The PM academic and professional worlds could take the lead, research the issues, develop models and best practices for addressing some of these crises. Different industries and organizations will be affected differently, so complexity will be inherent. But so what? Experienced program and project managers deal with complexity all the time. We've been dealing with stressful challenges our entire careers.

Perhaps more importantly, I think PM professional bodies need to get more involved. As Peter Morris exclaimed in the title of his 2017 paper, "...what the PM profession should be doing about it" (Morris 2017), the PM profession has the knowledge and experience to achieve big projects. Don't we, in fact, have an obligation to try? I think all PM associations in the world should identify the black elephants in their country or community and start thinking about how to solve them. What are the risks, programs and projects needed, and project management models or approaches to offer?

Time to Step Back

Why are we just responding to crisis after crisis? It's time to take a step back, see the forest for the trees, understand the bigger picture. What are the elephants in the room? Which ones are black elephants? (Hint; It's more than just climate change.) They are easy to see. And why isn't anyone in the project management world doing anything to stop or at least slow them down?

If you have a reaction, comment or suggest after reading this, please send a "letter to the editor" via email to editor@peworldjournal.com.

References

1. APM (2020). APM joins other professional bodies to tackle climate change in the built environment, Association for Project Management, March 4th. <https://www.apm.org.uk/news/apm-joins-other-professional-bodies-to-tackle-climate-change-in-the-built-environment/>
2. APM (2019b). Climate Change, Clean Growth and Sustainability. Challenge Paper 2 in Project the Future series. Association for Project Management, September. https://www.apm.org.uk/media/38315/ptf_msgd_ch2_digital_spreads.pdf
3. APM (2019a). Our Statement on Climate Change. Association for Project Management. <https://www.apm.org.uk/about-us/corporate-social-responsibility/environment/climate-change-statement/>
4. Bau, M. S., Brandao, M., Lakshmi, A., & Yale, L. (2008). Mitigating natural hazards through project management. Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2008—EMEA, St. Julian's, Malta. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute. <https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/mitigating-natural-hazard-project-management-8335>
5. Coesmans, P. (2020). How to build a Resilient Organisation, IPMA blog post, April 29th. <https://www.ipma.world/how-to-build-a-resilient-organisation/>
6. Friedman, Tom (2020). How We Broke the World: Greed and globalization set us up for disaster. New York Times, Sunday, 31 May. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/30/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-globalization.html>
7. Friedman, Tom (2014). Conservation is the best way to stop the 'black elephants'. New York Times, November 26th. <http://gm5-kweb.newscyclecloud.com/article/20141126/NEWS/812053452?template=ampart>
8. Friedman, Tom (2014). Stampeding Black Elephants. New York Times, November 22nd. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/23/opinion/sunday/thomas-l-friedman-stampeding-black-elephants.html?campaignId=7JFJX>
9. Hine, Dougald (2010). Black Elephants and Skull Jackets: A conversation with Vinay Gupta, May 1. <http://dougald.nu/black-elephants-skull-jackets-a-conversation-with-vinay-gupta/>
10. Leslie-Carter, R. (2019). What can project managers do as the climate emergency intensifies? APM, September 20th. <https://www.apm.org.uk/blog/what-can-project-managers-do-as-the-climate-emergency-intensifies/>
11. Morris, P.W.G. (2017). Climate Change and What the Project Management Profession Should Be Doing About It: A UK Perspective, Association for Project Management, November. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/171101-APM-Climate-Change-Report.pdf>
12. Pells, D. L. (2018). Global Citizens, Project Earth Revisited (Again), Solving Global Problems and..., *PM World Journal*, January. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp->

[content/uploads/2018/01/pmwj66-Jan2018-Pells-solving-global-problems-editorial-welcome.pdf](https://www.peworldjournal.com/content/uploads/2018/01/pmwj66-Jan2018-Pells-solving-global-problems-editorial-welcome.pdf)

13. Pells, D. L. (2017). Hurricane Harvey, Floods, Disaster Relief and Recovery for Project Managers... *PM World Journal*, September. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/pmwj62-Sep2017-Pells-hurricane-harvey-record-floods-editorial-welcome.pdf>
14. Pells, D.L. (2011). Project Management in the Ring of Fire: Force Majeure revisited – Extreme Weather and Natural Disasters are neither Acts of God nor Black Swans. *PM World Today*, April. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/pmwj21-apr2014-Pells-Ring-of-Fire-SecondEdition.pdf>
15. Pells, D.L. (2009). Disruptive Events! Are You, Your Project or Your Organization Prepared? *PM World Today*, September. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/2009-Sept-Pells-Disruptive-Events-Are-you-prepared.pdf>
16. Pells, D.L. (2008). Back to the Future: Project Earth Revisited. *PM World Today*, April. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2008-Sep-PMWT-Editorial-Pells-Project-Earth-Revisited.pdf>
17. Pells, D.L. (2007). Project Management for Emergency Response and Disaster Recovery – A Call to Arms! *PM World Today*, September. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PMWL-Pells-PM-for-Disaster-ER-Editorial-Sep2007.pdf>
18. Pells, D. L., Quaife, C., Tonne, C. (1994). Project Earth: Opportunity and Responsibility for Project Management Leadership in a Changing World. Conference paper; INTERNET'94 Global Congress on Project Management, Oslo, Norway. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/1994-Oslo-Project-Earth-opportunity-and-responsibility-for-proj.pdf>
19. PMI (2020). PMIImpact: The Social Good Impact of Professionals in Project Management. <https://www.pmi.org/membership/volunteer/pmimpact>
20. Prieto, R. (2013). Intersection of Engineering, Construction and Logistics Post-Disaster, *PM World Journal*, July. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/pmwj12-jul2013-prieto-interesection-engineering-construction-logistics-post-disaster-FeaturedPaper.pdf>
21. Prieto, R. (2011). Black Swan Risks, *PM World Today*, January. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/pmwj32-mar2015-Prieto-black-swan-risks-second-edition.pdf>
22. Prieto, R. (2010). Phases of an Event of Scale from a Relief, Response and Reconstruct Perspective, *PM World Today*, September 2010. Available online at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/pmwj94-Jun2020-Prieto-phases-of-an-event-of-scale-2nd-ed.pdf>
23. Ram, J. (2020). From pandemic to prosperity: The post Covid-19 life PM focus, IPMA blog post, May 14th. <https://www.ipma.world/from-pandemic-to-prosperity-the-post-covid-19-life-pm-focus/>

24. Rogers, P. (2020). Coronavirus: Bill Gates predicted pandemic in 2015, San Jose Mercury News, Bay Area News Group, March 27th - <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/03/25/coronavirus-bill-gates-predicted-pandemic-in-2015/>
25. Small, Mike (2016). The Black Elephant in the Room. Bella Caledonia, June 14th. <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2016/06/14/the-black-elephant-in-the-room/>
26. Sterling, M. (2008). Project management methodology for post disaster reconstruction. Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2008—Asia Pacific, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute. <https://www.pmi.org/learning/library/project-management-methodology-post-disaster-reconstruction-1857>
27. Townsend, S. and Summers, D. (2020). Project Management and COVID-19 Recovery, Government Executive, May 12th. <https://www.govexec.com/management/2020/05/project-management-and-covid-19-recovery/165298/>
28. Waage, Sissel (2015). Context, Business Risk and Stampeding Black Elephants. Sustainablebrands.com, April 3: <https://sustainablebrands.com/read/new-metrics/context-business-risk-stampeding-black-elephants>
29. Wagner, R. (2020). Research Programme ‘Capabilities for delivering projects in the context of societal development (CaProSoc)’ initiated by AME”, *PM World Journal*, February. <https://pmworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/pmwj90-Feb2020-Wagner-research-programme-CaProSo-initiated-by-AME.pdf>
30. York, Suzanne (2014). Black Elephants: Ignorance, Extinction and Human Impact on the Planet. Populationgrowth.org, November 26th. <http://populationgrowth.org/black-or-grey-the-outlook-for-elephants-and-other-species-is-alarmed/>

About the Author



David L. Pells

Editor/Publisher, PMWJ
Texas, USA



David L. Pells is Managing Editor and publisher of the ***PM World Journal*** (www.peworldjournal.com) and Managing Director of the PM World Library (www.peworldlibrary.net). David is an internationally recognized leader in the field of professional project management with more than 35 years of experience on a variety of programs and projects, including engineering, construction, energy, defense, transit, technology and nuclear security, and project sizes ranging from thousands to billions of dollars. Since 2007, he has been a senior program management advisor to the National Nuclear Security Administration in Washington, DC., as well as to several national laboratories in the U.S.

David Pells has been an active professional leader in the United States since the 1980s, serving on the board of directors of the Project Management Institute (PMI®) twice. He was founder and chair of the Global Project Management Forum (1995-2000), an annual meeting of leaders of PM associations from around the world. David was awarded PMI's Person of the Year award in 1998 and Fellow Award, PMI's highest honor, in 1999. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the Association for Project Management (APM) in the UK; Project Management Associates (PMA - India); the Istituto Italiano di Project Management (ISIMP); and the Russian Project Management Association (SOVNET). Since 2010 he is an honorary member of the Project Management Association of Nepal.

Former managing editor of *PM World Today*, he is the creator, editor and publisher of the *PM World Journal* (ISSN: 2330-4880). David has a BA in Business Administration from the University of Washington and an MBA from Idaho State University in the USA. He has published widely and spoken at conferences and events worldwide. David lives near Dallas, Texas and can be contacted at publish@peworldjournal.net.

To view other works by David Pells, visit his author showcase in the PM World Library at <https://peworldlibrary.net/authors/david-l-pells/>