

Project Management needs a Higher Purpose!

Part 1: Introduction, the Perfect Storm, Crises & PM ¹

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Introduction

This is a follow-on to my June 2020 editorial on black elephants². It's a somewhat obvious extension and partial answer to the question posed at the end of the June editorial regarding 'what to do about it'. What can (or should) the project management professional world be doing to help address some (or all) of the charging black elephants, the looming global problems such as climate change, disease, hunger, homelessness, etc. These are my current thoughts on the matter, but I've been thinking about this for a long time.

With the Covid-19 pandemic still raging around the world, and especially here in the United States, I also want to return to the Black Elephant question related to this health crisis. The pandemic has also dramatically exacerbated such global problems as unemployment, poverty, hunger, access to education and others. The Black Elephants have multiplied, grown larger and are moving faster. Some, like the pandemic, seem to have morphed into a flock of Black Swans, at the local, program and project levels.

Meanwhile, climate change and global warming have continued. We are also coming to the end of the current presidential administration in the United States, a period marked by corruption, incompetence and unethical behavior by those in powerful positions. One of the world's oldest (modern) democracies has teetered on collapse as a large portion of the population seemed to be reverting to 19th century attitudes and behavior. Perhaps more importantly, civil society itself seems to be at risk, as the rule of law has been threatened, institutions weakened, and social unrest exacerbated. History came alive as we studied the past and tried to predict the future. But what future do we want?

It is often difficult to step back, to consider the big picture or long-term consequences of current conditions or trends. Nevertheless, we must occasionally do so. As I've gotten older, I find myself thinking more about the history and future of the PM field, program and project life cycles, changes and trends in the world that affect our profession.

So now I ask again, what is the project management world doing in response to the current pandemic and other black elephants? What can we do, now or in the future? What about the future? Obviously, I don't know everything, cannot predict the future, may be missing important information or contexts, may just be wrong. But here are my thoughts.

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² Pells, D. L. (2020). Black Elephants and ... maybe Project Management. *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue VI, June. <https://peworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/pmwj94-Jun2020-Pells-black-elephants-and-maybe-project-management-editorial3.pdf>

2020: The Perfect Storm?

It seems that 2020 became a perfect storm. The Cambridge dictionary defines perfect storm as an extremely bad situation in which many bad things happen at the same time.³ The Oxford dictionary says it's an occasion when several bad things happen at the same time, creating a situation that could not be worse.⁴ I like the Merriam-Webster definition: a critical or disastrous situation created by a powerful concurrence of factors.⁵ These definitions all seem to describe this disastrous year.

Let's start with the Covid-19 Pandemic. Here in the U.S., new records for cases, hospitalizations and deaths are being recorded almost daily. According to John Hopkins University⁶, total Covid cases in the United States now surpass 20 million with over 330,000 deaths. Daily increases nationwide are exceeding 250,000 cases and 2,500 deaths. Hospitals and healthcare workers are being overwhelmed in many places, especially in rural areas with fewer resources. Even as vaccines are now being distributed, the situation is expected to get worse with the pandemic lasting through most of 2021. Unemployment has increased, along with hunger and homelessness. And with less income comes lost health insurance, less healthcare, more hunger and misery.



But the pandemic was not the first crisis of 2020. The year started with Australia burning, bushfires consuming millions of hectares of grassland, national forests, farms and towns. More than a billion animals lost their lives, along with many people. The Australian economy took a huge hit. Over the year, massive fires also burned in the Amazon region of Brazil and in Argentina, India, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, the United States and elsewhere.⁷ Being originally from the Pacific Northwest, I watched in horror as huge portions of Western California, Oregon and Washington states burned last summer.

In May Super Cyclone Amphan hit Eastern India and Pakistan with category 5 winds. In June Cyclone Nisarga was the strongest storm to hit Maharashtra State in India since 1891. In October, cyclone Ninfa hit central Vietnam causing catastrophic flooding. According to Wikipedia, "Throughout 2020, 127 tropical cyclones have formed... The strongest storm of the year so far was Typhoon Goni peaking with winds of 315 km/h (195 mph). The deadliest storm of the year was Hurricane Eta, while the costliest storm of the year was Hurricane Laura, with a damage cost around \$14.1 billion."⁸



³ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/perfect-storm>

⁴ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/perfect-storm>

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/perfect%20storm>

⁶ <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=covid+cases+johns+hopkins>

⁷ <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2020-10-27/world-on-fire-2020-experts-explain-the-global-wildfire-crisis/> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:2020_wildfires

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tropical_cyclones_in_2020

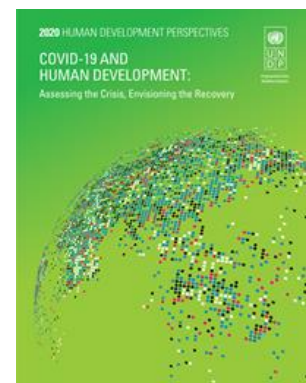
In the U.S., the city of Phoenix set a record in 2020 for the most days with temperatures of 100 degrees Fahrenheit or higher with 144 days. Heat, especially over prolonged periods, exacerbates existing health conditions and is one of the leading causes of weather-related deaths in the U.S. So far this year, the U.S. has had 16 natural disasters (including wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes and drought) that each caused at least \$1 billion in damage...⁹ It was announced recently that last month was the warmest November on record.

The pandemic and climate-related disasters have had enormous economic, social and human consequences. Widespread unemployment and hunger are at record levels. Social and political conflicts and unrest have rocked the U.S. and other countries. Lifestyles and business models have been upended and transformed. To compound the problems in the UK, they are now dealing with their post-BREXIT reality.

Global Crises Accelerate

According to the World Health Organization, “The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems and the world of work. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic is devastating: tens of millions of people are at risk of falling into extreme poverty, while the number of undernourished people, currently estimated at nearly 690 million, could increase by up to 132 million by the end of the year... Nearly half of the world’s 3.3 billion global workforce are at risk of losing their livelihoods... For most, no income means no food, or, at best, less food and less nutritious food... The pandemic has been affecting the entire food system and has laid bare its fragility...”¹⁰

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) as early as May, “The COVID-19 pandemic is unleashing a human development crisis. On some dimensions of human development, conditions today are equivalent to levels of deprivation last seen in the mid-1980s. But the crisis is hitting hard on all of human development’s constitutive elements: income, health and education... simulations suggest conditions today would correspond to a steep and unprecedented decline in human development. With almost 9 in 10 students out of school and deep recessions in most economies, the decline in the index... would be equivalent to erasing all the progress in human development of the past six years...”¹¹



⁹ <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/a-running-list-of-record-breaking-natural-disasters-in-2020/>

¹⁰ Impact of COVID-19 on people’s livelihoods, their health and our food systems (2020). Joint statement of ILO, FAO, IFAD and WHO, published by the World Health Organization, 13 October.

<https://www.who.int/news/item/13-10-2020-impact-of-covid-19-on-people%27s-livelihoods-their-health-and-our-food-systems>

¹¹ COVID-19 and Human Development: Assessing the Crisis, Envisioning the Recovery, UNDP. May 2020.

<http://hdr.undp.org/en/hdp-covid>

In 2015, member states of the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity by 2030. The 17 SDGs are integrated, they recognize that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability.¹²



For information and because many of you might not have read much about the SDGs, here the list:¹³

SDG1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere

SDG2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture

SDG3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

SDG4: Ensure inclusive and equitable **quality education** and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

SDG5: Achieve **gender equality** and empower all women and girls

SDG6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of **water and sanitation** for all

SDG7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern **energy for all**

SDG8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable **economic growth**, full and productive **employment** and decent work for all

SDG9: Build resilient **infrastructure**, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation

SDG10: Reduce income inequality within and among countries

¹² <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sustainable_Development_Goals

SDG11: Make **cities** and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable

SDG12: Ensure **sustainable consumption and production** patterns

SDG13: Take urgent action to **combat climate change and its impacts** by regulating emissions and promoting developments in renewable energy

SDG14: Conserve and **sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources** for sustainable development

SDG15: Protect, restore and promote **sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems**, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

SDG16: **Promote peaceful** and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

SDG17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the **global partnerships** for sustainable development

These are extremely ambitious goals for the world. But it seems to me that they are good goals for individual countries. Why wouldn't we want these same improvements in the UK, USA or any other country? And as you can see, they are addressing the black elephants. Why wouldn't we as individuals, organizations or the PM profession support these positive objectives, every one of which must be achieved via programs and projects?

I want to give a shout out here to GPM Global¹⁴ for their focus on these issues. Their P5 Standard for Sustainability in Project Management provides an excellent framework for assessing any program or project against the 17 SDGs with relevant considerations and actions.¹⁵ I also want to recognize APM and an article in APM's Summer 2020 edition of *Project* by Steve Crosskey, head of the United Nations Office of Project Services. In his article, Mr. Crosskey explains how the SDGs can provide a basis for those involved with infrastructure projects to think about and advance sustainability. (Crosskey 2020)¹⁶

Where was the PM Profession in 2020?

In my June 2020 editorial, I asked this question and provided a few positive examples from APM and PMI. For the most part, PM professional bodies were focused on changes in how we work, not on what needs to be done to solve problems. Clearly the changes in business and working conditions caused by the Pandemic have deeply affected programs, projects and PPM practices and processes. Perhaps the most significant was the move to remote work, virtual offices, virtual teams – recent trends that became a reality for everyone almost overnight. Literally all PM societies and their branches and chapters stopped meeting physically and ramped up virtual meetings, courses, conferences and communications. The results have actually been both positive and

¹⁴ <https://www.greenprojectmanagement.org/>

¹⁵

<https://greenprojectmanagement.org/images/PDF/P5/The%20GPM%20P5%20Standard%20for%20Sustainability%20in%20Project%20Management%20v2.0.pdf>

¹⁶ Unfortunately, *Project* is only available to APM members; this article might become freely available in the future

impressive, as variety, quality, convenience, cost and efficiencies have all improved. All good!

There have been even more positive developments in recent months. Even before the pandemic, APM had focused on climate change, issuing a policy statement, partnering with other British institutions, and publishing a challenge paper in response to the UK parliament's 2019 declaration of an environment and climate change emergency. Since January, APM has published many articles on responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁷ One of the most interesting is a June article by Rachael Pells (no relation) titled "Vaccine project management – a race against time".¹⁸ Perhaps the most encouraging was an article in March titled "Helping others during the coronavirus outbreak: A message from APM's CEO" by Debbie Dore.¹⁹



APM's three most recent editions of their *Project* magazine for members include some great articles, for example on reacting to Covid-19, sustainable development goals, resilience, collaboration in a crisis, Covid-19 sniffer dogs, rebuilding the economy, navigating crises, complex social change projects. Eddie Obeng's APM blog article describing how Covid-19 is a chance for leaders to 'Shake the Box' by embracing diversity is brilliant.²⁰

PMI has also stepped up its volunteer advocacy this year. According to PMI's press release on 12 November, "We partnered with the UN and mobilized our community to pledge 50,000 hours to projects contributing to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Our community exceeded all expectations and contributed more than 150,000 hours. PMI looks forward to continuing this effort each year. PMI's Global Month of Service encouraged staff, members, and volunteers to participate in community service activities... in order to make a positive impact."²¹ This was aligned with PMI's newly launched Diversity, Equity & Inclusion program.²² PMI has also launched PMImpact, The Social Good Impact of Professionals in Project Management, to promote and support the activities of PM professionals volunteering to help address problems, resolve issues and meet needs around the globe.²³ PMI's Covid-19 Response webpage promotes and supports volunteer efforts during the current pandemic.²⁴

I was also very impressed with PMI's promotion of the "Most Influential Projects of 2020".²⁵ Many of the projects recognized on their list were responses to the Covid-19

¹⁷ <https://www.apm.org.uk/search-results/#/?search=covid-19>

¹⁸ <https://www.apm.org.uk/blog/vaccine-project-management-a-race-against-time/>

¹⁹ <https://www.apm.org.uk/news/helping-others-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak-a-message-from-apm-s-ceo/>

²⁰ <https://www.apm.org.uk/blog/diversity-why-leaders-must-shake-the-box-to-build-a-new-world/>

²¹ <https://www.pmi.org/about/press-media/press-releases/project-management-institute-further-supports-global-advocacy-through-month-of-service>

²² <https://www.pmi.org/membership/volunteer/pmimpact/diversity-equity-and-inclusion>

²³ <https://www.pmi.org/membership/volunteer/pmimpact>

²⁴ <https://www.pmi.org/membership/volunteer/pmimpact/covid-19-response>

²⁵ <https://www.pmi.org/most-influential-projects>



pandemic, including the Covid-19 Therapeutics Accelerator, Covid-19 Data Lake project in the U.S. and the Nightingale Hospital project in London, among others. A total of 250 outstanding projects were recognized by PMI.²⁶ PMI has also introduced a PM Philanthropy page on their projectmanagement.com platform where PMI members can share articles, experiences and opinions.²⁷ PMI's Educational Foundation (EF)²⁸ has also had a busy year, promoting social outreach activities among PMI chapters, advancing project management education among youth and nonprofit organizations, and partnering with such organizations as Children International, F1iS, Junior Achievement Africa and Special Olympics International.²⁹ PMIEF also offers a variety of useful resources for nonprofits and educational organizations related to PM, including instructional kits, guides, case studies, reports and studies.³⁰ All of these initiatives and resources are great.

IPMA has also moved in a positive direction related to PM and society with perhaps its most significant initiative being the launch of the new academic journal, *Project Leadership and Society* (PLS). To be published by Elsevier as a sister journal of the *International Journal of Project Management* (IJPM), PLS is being led by Prof. Dr. Martina Huemann (editor-in-chief), Prof. Dr. Kirsi Aaltonen and Prof. Dr. Ding Ronggui. PLS articles will address the interaction between projects, project leadership and project management on the one hand, and economic, social, political and organizational processes, on the other.³¹ Many local PM organizations, including national associations, chapters and branches have also organized or sponsored activities to help society in one form or another.

These are all positive, with many great activities, initiatives and programs achieved or underway. But they only go so far and are not what I am talking about in this paper. What is project management actually for? What is our contribution to the world? What should it be? I think the purpose of project management should be to advance positive change in the world. It should be about more than making money (selling more certifications, courses or products, advancing careers to increase salaries, or improving productivity for organizations to be more profitable), developing models and standards (although those are important), or even educating project managers (although this is also key to advancing the PM field itself). The thing is...

Programs and projects come first, then PM (maybe)

Perhaps the most significant thing that I've realized this year is the overwhelming importance of many programs and projects, which have been highly visible during the

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ <https://www.projectmanagement.com/pages/634356/PM-Philanthropy>

²⁸ <https://pmief.org/>

²⁹ <https://pmief.org/about-us/news/meet-pmiefs-non-profit-partners>

³⁰ <https://pmief.org/library/resources>

³¹ <https://www.ipma.world/news/project-leadership-and-society-the-journal-of-the-international-project-management-association/>

pandemic and about which there is no visibility of professional project management (although project leadership has obviously been required, and in some cases just as obviously missing). Some well-known examples:

- **Huoshenshan Hospital** – 1,000 bed facility for quarantined Covid patients built in 10 days in February in Wuhan, China.³²
- **Operation Warp Speed** – A U.S. government sponsored program to produce and deliver 300 million doses of safe and effective vaccines with the initial doses available by January 2021, as part of a broader strategy to accelerate the development, manufacturing, and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics.³³
- **World Bank's Health Response to Covid-19** – a combination of new projects, restructuring and emergency components of existing projects, and deployment of disaster finance instruments, the World Bank Group's response is targeted in four key areas: saving lives, protecting the poor and vulnerable, ensuring sustainable business growth, and working to build a more resilient recovery.³⁴
- **Covid-19 Therapeutics Accelerator** – Announced in March 2020 as a partnership of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Wellcome and Mastercard, an initiative to speed-up the response to the COVID-19 epidemic by identifying, assessing, developing, and scaling-up treatments. ³⁵ Selected by PMI as the most influential project of 2020. ³⁶
- **Nigeria Covid-19 Action Recovery and Economic Stimulus - Program for Results (Nigeria CARES):** This program will help increase access to social transfers and basic services, as well as provide grants to poor and vulnerable households. It will also strengthen food supply chains for poor households while facilitating recovery and enhancing capabilities of MSMEs. This is financed through an International Development Association (IDA) credit of \$750 million.³⁷
- **Second Accelerating India's COVID-19 Social Protection Response Program** - A \$400 million World Bank project to support India's efforts at providing social assistance to the poor and vulnerable households, severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the second operation in a programmatic series of two. The first operation of \$750 million was approved in May 2020.



There are many other examples this year, in every hospital and healthcare facility in most countries, in many government agencies, in business entities struggling to survive, and in most charities, churches and schools. It is now clear that projects, outcomes and

³² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huoshenshan_Hospital

³³ <https://www.hhs.gov/coronavirus/explaining-operation-warp-speed/index.html>

³⁴ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2020/12/07/the-world-bank-group-mounts-the-fastest-and-largest-health-crisis-response-in-its-history-to-save-lives-from-covid-19>

³⁵ <https://www.therapeuticsaccelerator.org/>

³⁶ <https://www.pmi.org/most-influential-projects>

³⁷ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/12/15/world-bank-group-to-boost-nigerias-efforts-to-reduce-poverty>

benefits matter more to most stakeholders than project management methods, processes or standards. Knowledge, experience and leadership matter more. I suspect that very few leaders of major programs and projects launched in response to the Covid-19 pandemic hold PMI or IPMA certifications.

Don't get me wrong; I think project management is profoundly important. PM knowledge, competence and qualifications can be critically important, especially for individuals and organizations, and especially in an increasingly project-oriented world. But how can PM really help get important things done? Shouldn't the mission of project management be to achieve positive results, and especially the programs and projects that create a better world (or save the one we have)? Perhaps even ONLY those that create positive change.

The Eye of the Storm

If we consider 2020 a perfect storm, perhaps January 2021 will represent the eye of the storm, when the air clears, we can assess the damage and better glimpse the future. In the United States, national elections have concluded, a new president and administration will be installed, vaccines are being distributed, and steps taken to address the healthcare crisis, floundering economy and other big problems. The same should be true in Canada, China, Europe, India, Mexico, South America, the UK and other parts of the world.

I'm worried but hopeful. I'm not as optimistic as I used to be; global problems are too visible now. This country seems a mess. The whole world seems a mess. But I know many brilliant people, doctors, engineers, scientists, professors, leaders in the PM field, so I know great things are possible. I know what can be accomplished using project and program management approaches, methods, knowledge. I think these skills and resources can help solve big problems.

More to come

The above paragraphs were part of a much longer editorial, now broken into four shorter, more readable parts. Over the next three months, the following additional segments will be published:

- Part 2: Vision & Mission Statements, Social Responsibility and the Rogue Black Elephant
- Part 3: The Future of the Planet, Civil Society, Doing the Right Projects, What about Governance and The Power of Why
- Part 4: The Future of PM, Some Questions, Some Suggestions, First Things First and What's it to Be?

I think project management needs a higher purpose. This editorial, now in four parts, is my attempt to explain why and what we might be able to achieve going forward. If you would rather not wait and want a copy of the long version, please let me know via email.

Wishing you all a safe, healthy and happier new year!

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David Pells has been an active professional leader in the United States since the 1980s, as founder and president of several PMI chapters, founder of PMI's first SIG (Project Earth), and member of the PMI board of directors 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; the Instituto Italiano di Project Management (ISIMP - Italy); Project Management Associates (PMA - India); and the Russian Project Management Association (SOVNET). In 2010 he was made an honorary member of the Project Management Association of Nepal.

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