# Thinking and Working Politically as a Project Manager: Engaging with The Politics and Contestations in Project Management Institute's Conceptualizations of Project and Project Management [1]

## Isaac Odhiambo Abuya, PhD

University of Nairobi

**Abstract**

This seminal paper on 'Thinking and Working Politically (TWP)' in Projects argues that whereas the Project Management Institute's (PMI) conceptualizations of a project as 'a temporary endeavour undertaken to produce a unique product, service or result (PMI, 2008) and project management as 'the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements' (PMI 2017) reinforce the technically rational paradigm, these conceptualizations are inherently political. This paper engages project managers with the politics, power, interests and contestations embedded in PMI's definitions of project and project management. The paper contributes to the emerging and budding scholarship on Thinking and Working Politically (TWP) and argues that while the TWP paradigm has overly focused on development assistance and its potential contribution to aid (development effectiveness), the TWP is equally relevant to Project Management. Consequently, the paper extends the TWP scholarship to project management. It is posited that the journey to Thinking and Working Politically for project managers, especially those in developing and emerging country contexts and settings, begins with an honest engagement with the politics and contestations in PMI's conceptualizations of project and project management. It is further argued that 21st Century project managers should reflect on the political implications of PMI's definitions and should contend with the power, interests, contestations and information asymmetries embedded in the definitions. Last but not least, a case has been made for project managers to think beyond the technical rationality paradigm and integrate politically smart techniques, skills and methods in his or her project management toolkit.

## Introduction

Project management has traditionally been grounded on technical rationality and has strategically or naively eschewed politics. While technical rationality has informed project decisions and has shaped the way project success is conceptualized, we argue that the success of projects is equally and importantly embedded in the way project managers '*think and work*

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*politically'*.  Youker (1991) posited that power (and politics) is probably the most important topic in project management but at the same time one of the least discussed subjects.  According to Youker (1991) power, from an engineering perspective is defined as the ability to do work while from a social sense, power is the ability to get others to do the work (or actions) you want regardless of their desires. When we think of all the project managers who have responsibility without authority, who must elicit support by influence and not by command authority, then, according to Youker we can see why power(politics) is the most important topic in project management. Youker's papers raised the telltale sign for project managers to think and work politically.

 We argue that the Project Management Institute's conceptualizations of a project as 'a temporary endeavour undertaken to produce a unique product, service, or result' (PMI 2017) and project management as 'the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements' (PMI 2017), while making projects and project management technically rational, these definitions are inherently political. We wish to engage project managers with the politics, power, interests and contestations embedded in the definitions of project and project management. The journey to 'thinking and working politically' for project managers start with unpacking these definitions.

**The Second Orthodoxy in Development Assistance: Thinking and Working Politically**

Over the last 15 years, a new paradigm in development assistance, now famously referred to as "*Thinking and Working Politically (TWP),* has emerged to account for the elusive development effectiveness (sustainable outcome) in developing and emerging economies (Teskey 2017; Booth 2015; Booth, Francesconi and Frank 2002; Rocha Menocal 2014; Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock 2012), despite decades of massive financial and technical development assistance. Within development assistance community, Thinking and Working Politically is 'revolutionizing' the way development assistance and the attendant projects and interventions are being designed, planned, implemented and evaluated (Teskey 2017; Booth 2015; Booth, Francesconi and Frank 2002; Rocha Menocal 2014). Despite massive development assistance to developing countries and emerging economies, the results have been disappointing to say the least. The consistent elusiveness of development effectiveness despite the years of financial and technical assistance to these countries, has led to serious thinking about a second orthodoxy in development assistance, the Thinking and Working Politically orthodoxy (Teskey 2017).

According to Booth (2012), 'thinking politically requires understanding the local context and the competing factors that drive or block change', while working politically 'entails developing a deep understanding of that context in order to be able to seek and achieve progress'.  We argue that project managers need to think politically and work politically' to ensure not only the success of the project but also to assure their sustainability. However, for project managers to integrate Thinking and Working Politically, the starting point for this new orientation in project

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programming is for project managers to appreciate the possible politics, power, interests and contestations inherent in the very definition of a project and project management.

**Engaging with The Politics and Contestations in PMI's Conceptualizations of Project**

The Project Management Institute's conceptualizations of a project as 'a temporary endeavour undertaken to produce a unique product, service, or result' (PMI 2017) is inherently political. This definition embeds the very politics, power, interests and contestations that may affect the success and sustainability of projects. Moreover, the definition raises critical questions that project managers who are prepared to 'think and work politically' must honesty engage with:

- Who benefits and losses from the temporary nature of projects?

- What is the nature of the unique product, service or results?

- Who defines the product, service and result as unique?

- Who benefits and who losses out from these unique products, services, and results?

*The Politics and Contestations of Project Temporariness*

While the PMI's conceptualization of a project as 'a temporary endeavour' may look rational, it hides deep ontological, axiological and epistemological issues that are deeply political and polarizing: whose interests and served when projects are temporary? Who benefits and who loses in a temporary project work environment? Does the temporary nature of projects make project workers precarious?  Who is retained and who is released when a project is over, and who makes these decisions?  Who wield power and who is powerless in a temporary project environment?

These are not idle questions.  And they have deep implications for the success and sustainability of projects.  A project manager starting the journey of TWP should honestly engage with these questions.  While we appreciate that project managers work within the 'constraint of time' and may not the time to honestly engage with these questions, experienced project managers in developing countries and emerging economies will appreciate the relevance of these questions. Part of the thinking and working politically in project environments. Moreover, the development challenges in these countries are the results of decades of developmental marginalization: how can a temporary endeavour sustainable address challenges and problems arising from years of marginalization and exploitation? Again, while projects are temporary endeavors, some of the impacts may be negative and will long lasting.

Writing from the perspective of an African, we know that the temporary nature of development projects has been taken advantage of by political leaders and political entrepreneurs to perpetuate 'project fraud' (Abuya 2016) and has created and cemented a perception that 'projects do not last' and what one gets out of them is what matters. The temporariness of

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projects has thus emboldened corrupt practices in project management. In many developing and emerging economies, the temporary nature of projects reinforced by the temporary nature of political offices, have led to a culture of 'it is our time to eat". Moreover, the temporary nature of projects has led to emerging concerns over the working conditions of temporary workers working in temporary work environments created by projects. By their nature temporary workers experience less job security than regular workers. According to de Graaf-Zijl (2005), the nature of temporary workers and the contracts they work on are often designed for the reason of escaping employment protection legislation. Is this the case with temporary project organizations?

### Undertaking the Project: Contestations of Who is Engaged and Not Engaged to Create the Unique, Product and or Result

The Project Management Institute's conceptualizations of a project as 'a temporary endeavour *undertaken* to produce a unique product, service, or result' (PMI 2017) is inherently political: who is to be engaged and who is to be left out in the project is not just a technical question, but a highly charged political one. One important phrase in the conceptualization is 'undertaken". For this process of undertaking to be effective, project managers and project workers must be recruited and engaged. These are the people who are formally engaged to 'undertake' or implement the project. Project managers who think and work politically know from experience that while technical rationality should guide the selection and deployment of project workers, this process is inherently political. And successful projects are not just the results of efforts of technically qualified and competent staff, but staff with the required political connections and competence.

Examples abound in developing countries: development projects in developing countries require not only technically competent staff but politically aware and smart managers Teskey 2017; Booth 2015; Booth, Francesconi and Frank 2002; Rocha Menocal 2014; Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock 2012). Technical competence is critical but not sufficient condition and requirement for project success. Most of the development projects and programmes in Africa supported through aid, are staffed by highly qualified and technically competent expertise and locals: but a number have failed! So we know that technical competence is not the cure of project failure. The cure to the elusive development effectiveness in aid funded projects and programmes in developing and emerging economies is managers and project workers who think and work politically (Teskey 2017, Booth, 2015).

### The Politics and Contestations of the Unique Products, Service and Results

The project managers, especially those working in developing and emerging country settings, must engage with the second conceptualization of a project a temporary endeavour to 'create a unique product, service or results. Again, some questions are important: who defines the

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product, service and result as unique? Who benefits and who loses in such a conceptualization? How does the 'unique product, service or result' compensate for the problems and challenges created by the temporariness of a project?

 A project manager who thinks and works politically will appreciate the implications of these questions and their relevance to project success and sustainability.  We argue that the politics and contestations of what a project is to produce (project products, service and results) is intrinsically tied up with the perception of stakeholders, most of whom are strong political and economic connections. However, the perception of the historically marginalized and poor should be explored and integrated:  it is critically important for project managers to not only to understand the local contexts but to understand how the stakeholders (both strong and marginalized) in the local contexts conceptualize what is 'unique' product, service and or results. What they define as unique is what is unique in their context! Moreover, project managers who think and work politically are aware that programming in local contexts may not necessarily require the production of 'unique products, services or results', but programming that address and promote equitable outcomes, promote social justice, especially for marginalized communities.

This perspective is reinforced by Sage, Dainty and Brooke (2013) who remind us that a number of scholars conceptualize project performativity, as "discursive power games", lending further credence to the critical place of politics in projects. Without devaluing and undermining the critical importance. These "discursive power games" influence to a greater the extent projects success and sustainable project outcomes.  Thus, while recruitment of technically competent staff is critical to the creation of unique products, service of result, the project managers should be equally politically competent.  However, while the importance of technical and political competence of project managers and project workers cannot be overemphasized, it is equally important for project managers to realize that recruitment of project workers may need to take into consideration locally sourced staff who are both technically qualified and politically competent. Local staff should also occupy 'politically prestigious' positions in the project. Most of the failed aid assistance projects reserved 'politically and high paying positions to their foreign experts while allocating less prestigious and poorly paid positions to local experts.  The 'tyranny of experts' (Park 2019) has contributed to local discontent and in some cases sabotaging of development assistance programs, projects and related interventions. Thus, the question of who "undertakes' the creation of the unique products, services and or results, in a project has serious implications for project managers who think and work politically.

Thus, PMI's conceptualization of a project as temporary endeavour *undertaken* to produce a unique product, service or result, while rational, hides murky and contested political issues: power asymmetries and interests.

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**Conceptualization of Project Management: Thinking and Working Politically**

In this section, we argue that the Project Management Institute's conceptualization project management as 'the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements' (PMI 2017), while making projects and project management technically rational, is inherently political. We wish to engage project managers with the politics, power, interests and contestations embedded in the project management. The journey to 'thinking and working politically' for project managers start with unpacking these definitions.

Writing in the 70s on the failure of development projects in developing countries, Rondinelli (1976) argued that those responsible for management of projects in developing have been trained on the traditional rational approaches which emphasised technical knowledge and the application of specialized techniques with little regard to appreciation of the complex tasks of planning and executing development projects. Rondinelli (1976) further posited that conventional public administration training — based on legalistic, centralized, regulatory procedures — are not adequate to deal with the dynamics of change. We share this concern: PMI has focused a lot of attention on training and certifying technically competent project managers, who can construct complex Gantt charts, project schedules etc with limited attention of training and capacity building of project managers on how to think and work politically. While the rational approach to project management has contributed in no mean way to furthering and embedding project management in organizations and institutions worldwide, there is growing and consistent evidence of project failure: these projects are designed and managed by technical competent and qualified PMs. As the project environments and setting get more complex, technical rationality alone will not help project managers to work effectively with wicked problems.

Kinsella2007) conceptualizes technical rationality as a management paradigm holds that practitioners are instrumental problem solvers who select technical means best suited to particular purposes, with rigorous professional practitioners solve well-formed instrumental problems by applying theory and techniques derived from systematic, preferably scientific knowledge.  While technical rationality has contributed greatly in the creation of 'unique products, service and or result' (PMI, 2017), it has its limitations. One technical rationality is premised on the assumption that development problems can be solved through the application of 'project techniques' and technically sound methodologies. Second, technical rationality predicates linear thinking to problem solving, and third, technical rationality assumes that development problems are technical in nature.

These assumptions are grossly wrong. Developing countries are confronted by intractable wicked development problems that requires the application of not just techniques, but politically smart applications. The emerging Covid -19 is an excellent example of an emerging wicked development problems. Covid is not just a public health issues requiring the application of

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rational public and medical tool and tools: Covid is intrinsically bound up with the politics of power, information asymmetry and issues of global justice and equity. The importance of thinking and working politically in project is persuasively presented by Cicmil, Williams, Thomas and Hodgson: "by contrasting the traditional approaches based on rational, objective, and universal representations of 'the project' with a phronetic analysis of the ambiguous, fragmented and political reality of project situations" (2006, pg.679). Thus the application of technically rational methodologies, and techniques to such wicked problems will only scratch the surface of the development challenges confronting the world, and more so, developing countries. Project management is not just the application of technically oriented techniques, skills and methodologies but should also include the application and integration of politically smart techniques, skills and methodologies. Consequently, the 21st century project manager will require to add thinking and working politically methodology in his or her project management toolkit.

**Conclusion**

This paper contributes to the emerging and budding scholarship on Thinking and Working politically (TWP). While the TWP paradigm has overly focused on development assistance and its potential contribution to aid (development effectiveness), this paper extends the TWP scholarship to project management. We have argued that the journey to thinking and working politically for project managers working in developing and emerging country contexts and settings begins with an honest engagement with the politics and contestations in PMI's conceptualization of project and project management. We have argued that 21st Century project managers should reflect on the political implications of PMI definitions and must contend with the power, interests, contestations and information asymmetries embedded in the definitions. We have also argued that project managers should think beyond the technical rationality paradigm and integrate politically smart techniques, skills and methods in his or her project management toolkit.

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## About the Author

**Isaac Odhiambo Abuya, PhD**

Nairobi, Kenya

**Dr. Isaac Odhiambo Abuya** teaches undergraduate and post graduate courses in Project Planning and Management at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. He has over 20 years of experience in designing, planning and implementing high impact development projects in Kenya. He also served as the first Chief of Staff of the County Government of Homa Bay, Kenya. Dr. Abuya has an earned PhD in Project Planning and Management and a Master of Arts degree in Project Planning and Management from the University of Nairobi.

The views expressed in this paper do not reflect the position of the University of Nairobi.

He can be contacted through: isaac.abuya@uonbi.ac.ke