

Projects and project management for a sustainable social impact¹

Projects and project management from a social perspective²

By Reinhard Wagner

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, projects and project management are used as a matter of course in everyday working life as a solution approach for demanding tasks. A glance at the instruments of project management quickly reveals that they are based on the paradigms of rational thinking and action or on the mathematical principles of operations research from the middle of the last century (Morris 2013). People tended to play a subordinate role in this approach and were considered more of a risk factor in project-related work grounded in a process of efficient implementation. Project management standards, the associations and the literature focused mainly on the processes, methods and tools of managing projects in the following decades. It was not until the 1990s that people and their perspective on projects were addressed. At first, the focus was more on the qualification and certification of project personnel so that all of them could support the execution of projects as efficiently as possible. Only gradually did the realization take hold that people do projects for people and that the social processes are just as important to consider as management processes and methods throughout the project life cycle (MacNicol 2013).

PROJECTS AS SOCIAL PROCESSES

Even if today it sounds quite trivial that people in projects work together towards a common goal and that, in this process, more and more often an effect is also achieved for the people involved and affected, this fact was only recognized in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For example, Lundin and Söderholm describe in their theory of temporary organization that projects are constituted by time, tasks, team, and transition. “Any temporary organization needs to be designed by and around people. Temporary

¹ This is the first in a series of articles by Reinhard Wagner, PMWJ honorary global advisor and former Chair of IPMA. The series aims to position projects and project management in the context of society as social activities performed by and for people. The focus is on a sustainable social impact, which is to be achieved through the projects, and less on the management of the projects and the immediate deliverables. At the same time, projects are to be positioned as a means of self-realization through which people can jointly work for their communities, the environment or society as a whole. The series is aimed at the global community of project management practitioners, researchers, and those interested in learning about current developments in the field of project activities in society and how to achieve sustainable social impact through this engagement.

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organizations are naturally also dependent on the will, commitment and ability of individuals for their creation, development and termination” (Lundin and Söderholm 1995, 441). More than one and a half decades later, Winter and Szczepanek highlight in their book 'Images of Projects' seven perspectives under which the project is also described as a social process. “The SOCIAL IMAGE is a framework for seeing projects as social processes, covering aspects such as the ever-changing flux of events, the individuals, groups and organizations involved, and other aspects such as social networks, culture and tribalism, and language and metaphor” (Winter and Szczepanek 2009, 58).

It is no coincidence that stakeholder management was given special emphasis during the concurrent development of the first international standard for project management, ISO 21500, and was later also adopted in the PMBOK Guide of the Project Management Institute (PMI). The International Project Management Association (IPMA) had already started in the 1990s to describe competence requirements for project managers in a competence baseline, which was then released in 2006 in the third and finally in 2015 in the fourth and currently valid version. Competence is understood as the application of knowledge, skills and abilities for achieving desired results in a project and cover the competence areas of 'perspective', 'people' and 'practice'. The 'people' competences particularly describe the “personal and social competences that an individual working in the project, programme or portfolio needs to possess to be able to realise success” (IPMA 2015, 29). In addition, the social perspective in projects and project management also involves a variety of other aspects, including those of motivation, self-management, leadership and teamwork, and many more (Turner et al. 2010).

The two sociologists Boltanski and Chiapello take up the motif of social networking to describe an image of project society characterized by a continuing connection of different people in the context of projects: “The *project* is the occasion and reason for connection. It temporarily assembles a very disparate group of people, and presents itself as a *highly activated section of network* for a period of time that is relatively short, but allows for the construction of more enduring links that will be put on hold while remaining available. Projects make production and accumulation possible in a world which, were it to be purely connexionist, would simply contain flows, where nothing could be stabilized, accumulated or crystallized” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2018, 104). Projects are therefore time-bound exchange formats in which people meet to be active with each other towards an agreed goal, organized and moderated by a project head who puts his or her mediating skills at the service of the group. Increasingly, the initiative comes from the individuals themselves, who want to network with others, be active together and achieve something. So it is primarily self-determination and motivation for projects that creates energy for collaboration and brings people together again and again, in a continuous flow of projects, but rarely in the same constellation.

In 'Together', Richard Sennett also emphasizes people's desire to cooperate with the aim of getting things done: “Cooperation oils the machinery of getting things done, and sharing with others can make up for what we may individually lack. Cooperation is embedded in our genes, but cannot remain stuck in routine behaviour; it needs to be developed and deepened” (Sennett 2012, ix). Particular emphasis is placed on the fact that cooperation is a craft that requires listening and engaging in open dialogue, and happens across all

levels of society. The proliferation of project-based collaboration is also the focus of Grabher and Ibert, who use the term 'project ecologies' to describe a relational space that encompasses "social layers on multiple scales, from the micro level of interpersonal networks to the meso level of intra- and inter-organizational collaboration to the macro level of wider institutional settings (Grabher and Ibert 2012, 176). This is primarily about collaborative learning and the orchestration of co-creative processes. Projects temporarily develop and test new ideas and approaches, which then establish themselves through various connections of people that result in a long-term behaviour and routine.

PERFORMING PROJECTS AS A HUMAN CONDITION?

Building on the above statements, Jensen, Thuesen, and Geraldi even characterize performing projects as a human condition, as something stable over time and universal, like breathing or aging. "Today, a human condition is widely understood also in the context of historical and sociological transformations. This opens the understanding of human condition to something more fluid while still permanent enough to have a lasting impact on us as individuals and a society" (Jensen, Thuesen and Geraldi 2016, 22). This condition includes all the activities (what we do), the space in which the activities take place (where we do it), the time in which the activities take place (when we do it) and finally the people with whom we perform the activities together (with whom we do it). Jensen (2012) goes even further and talks about a 'project society' in which everyone, anytime and anywhere, realizes projects for themselves or for others. One activity results in another. In his understanding, projects are, as in a dance, joint activities over a certain period of time, in which something emerges through close coordination and in ever new constellations the results of temporary cooperation are further developed in an evolutionary way.

Although for some the prospect of the project society seems desirable, one must certainly also keep in mind the negative side effects. For example, a divide could occur in society between a project class, in which individuals who have the motivation and competence necessary for projects are privileged and can thus gain advantages for themselves, and a non-project class of individuals that lag behind (Kovach and Kucerova 2009). People working in projects may feel lonely on the long run, may end up in precariat as they do not earn enough during short-term temporary contracts and suffer from uncertainties what their future employability concerns (Jalocha and Cwikla 2017). Jensen concludes that "projecting people are driven into despair because the project society offers no necessities... [it] is a headlong drive into the despair of possibilities. While constantly urged to think of new possibilities, they are left to stand alone with the feeling of insufficiency as most of all of these things come to nothing anyway" (Jensen 2012, 132).

In the next part of the series, we will take an in-depth look at projects and project management in the context of society.

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Reinhard Wagner has been active for more than 35 years in the field of project-related leadership, in such diverse sectors as Automotive, Engineering, and Consultancy, as well as various not-for-profit organizations. As Managing Director of Tiba Managementberatung GmbH, a leading PM Consultancy in Munich/Germany, he supports executives of industrial clients in transforming their companies towards a project-oriented, adaptive and sustainably successful organization. Reinhard Wagner has published 36 books as well as several hundred articles and blogposts in the field of project, program and project portfolio management. In more than 20 years of voluntary engagement he served the German Project Management Association (GPM) as well as the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in a range of leadership roles (including President and Chairman) and was granted for his international commitment with the Honorary Fellowship of IPMA and several of IPMA's Member Associations. Reinhard is Senior Lecturer at the Alma Mater Europaea and is currently finishing his doctoral thesis on the topic of Project Society. He can be contacted via reinhard.wagner@tiba.de.