

Projects and project management for a sustainable social impact¹

Projects and project management in the context of society

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By Reinhard Wagner

INTRODUCTION

Project management primarily evolved in the context of technical achievements and was later brought to perfection there (Morris 2013); we have already elaborated on this in the first part of the series. It was, for example, about using project management to realize the development of missiles, the realization of infrastructure or complex software systems. The aim was to work systematically and professionally towards the objectives by using resources as efficiently as possible and limiting risks to a great extent. This aim was pursued by perfecting the way in which projects were planned, the methods and techniques used, software solutions and fine-tuned processes employed. Those involved had to become qualified and often certified in the project management procedures applied. Even the introduction of the Agile Manifesto and agile methods for implementing software development projects did little to change this fact. The fact that projects and project management were also applied outside the technical sphere was almost overlooked during this time. It is only in recent years, triggered by the pressing societal challenges, that this area of application has increasingly come back into focus. Because as early as the 17th century, well before the industrial revolution, Daniel Defoe wrote about projects as a way of solving societal challenges, such as medical care, improving educational opportunities for women, or general welfare (Defoe, 1697). In this part of the series, we would therefore like to explore the question in which areas of society projects and project management are applied today, what challenges arise and how these are solved.

¹ This is the second 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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PROJECTS IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIETY

Before we contextualize projects within society, we must first address the notion of 'society' itself. The [Cambridge Dictionary](#) defines the term as “a large group of people who live together in an organized way, making decisions about how to do things and sharing the work that needs to be done. All the people in a country, or in several similar countries, can be referred to as a society.” A society is constituted within certain (spatial) boundaries and exhibits a social structure. The social structures have been described in the past decades by authors such as Max Weber (Tribe, 2019) or Anthony Giddens (1984). Societies exhibit patterns of relationships (social relations) among individuals who share a particular culture, values, or institutions. In principle, a society relies on state institutions (from the national to the municipal level), the economy, and above all on civil society with a wide variety of activities, including but not limited to education and training, arts and culture, sports, welfare and religion.

With the economic development since the beginning of the first industrial revolution, projects have established themselves as an integral part of working in companies. No wonder that in studies on projectification in the economy (Wald et al 2015), the proportion of time spent on projects compared to total working time is more than one-third in many countries and continues to rise. However, these studies also show that this figure is lower in the public sector and, depending on the level of development and the economic system in the particular country, even significantly lower (Ou, Hsiung and Wang 2018).

This probably has to do with the fact that public administration traditionally tends to perform routine and sovereign tasks that are repetitive in nature and aimed at stability. In recent years, however, there has been a great deal of pressure on the administration to renew itself, e.g., in the form of digitization or eGovernment, which requires more work to be done in collaborative projects with partners from industry (Hodgson et al 2019). On the one hand, the difference in experience in the realization of projects between the private and public sectors can lead to problems in public-led projects, such as Berlin Airport. On the other hand, it is also an opportunity to learn from each other, e.g., in the context of public-private partnership (PPP) projects (Wagner 2022). Especially in the context of urban development (Grabher and Thiel 2015a) and smart cities (Wagner 2018), many projects are implemented in a collaborative effort between the public authorities and private-sector companies interested in making a contribution to solving challenges.

Grabher and Ibert coin the term 'Project Ecology' that denotes “relational space, which affords the personal, organizational, and institutional resources for performing projects. This relational space 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).

Within the framework of project ecology, social relationships of varying strength may be at work, ranging from loose connections between people who occasionally come together in projects, e.g., to organize a street festival or perform a piece of music together. People in a local community or in an association, a private company or a network of companies are more likely to come together and organize projects out of a common interest and knowledge of how to organize and successfully implement projects. This may be in the context of sports events, art, and culture, economic activities, neighborhood social projects, or civic engagement for the international development aid, to list just a few examples. The more often people join in projects, gaining experience and building trust through joint action, the easier it is to find project-based solutions to complex societal tasks. These include, for example, long-term urban development, projects for inclusion, or coping with migration flows. "Social life is composed of a proliferation of encounters and temporary, but reactivatable connections with various groups, operated at potentially considerable social, professional, geographical and cultural distance. The *project* is the occasion and reason for the connection" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2018: 104). Jensen even goes so far as to speak of society as a "project society" in which everyone makes projects, for themselves or for others (Jensen 2012). In Germany, a well-known DIY chain has popularized the term "project" by using the slogan "Mach Dein Projekt" (Do your project) in their advertising to push craft activities in the garden, on the house or in the home - and of course to promote their services.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIETY

Project management as a professional discipline emerged only in the second half of the last century, primarily in the Aerospace and Defence industry (Morris 2013). Based on the mathematical approaches from Operations Research, planning approaches such as various network planning techniques, the Critical Path Method (CPM) or the sophisticated Program Evaluation Review Technique (PERT) were developed and applied to complex engineering projects and programs. With the International Project Management Association (IPMA) and the Project Management Institute (PMI), professional associations emerged that further standardized these project management methods and disseminated them internationally through qualification and certification offerings in the global economy (Hodgson and Muzio 2012). Through related associations or chapters, the standards have been applied at regional and local levels and, in some cases, adapted to the specifics of the respective context. For example, the British government recognized early on the importance of project management standards for the effective implementation of public projects and programs. It published its standards on the subject and offered qualification and certification programs for the market.

Several years ago, the [European Commission](#) also commissioned a working group to develop its own set of standards for project, program, and portfolio management, which would then be used for publicly funded projects. And the [International Organization for Standardization \(ISO\)](#) has been publishing standards for the management of projects, programs and portfolios that are intended to be "applicable to any organization, including public, private and charitable, as well as to any type of project, regardless of purpose, delivery approaches, life cycle model used, complexity, size, cost or duration" (ISO 2020: 1). However, these best-practice standards are complex and time-consuming to apply. That is why they have become established primarily in the business world. Standards for less projectified areas of society have so far been rare. For example, Project Management for Development Organizations ([PM4DEV](#)) offers a set of particular standards, trainings and support functions for the specific requirements. [Agile management approaches](#) are also becoming increasingly popular in the field of humanitarian aid projects.

What is special in international development aid, however, are evaluation procedures that support the planning and monitoring of a project's specific social value. One example is the [Logical Framework Approach \(LFA\)](#). More about this in the next parts of this series.

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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.