

Projects and project management for a sustainable social impact¹

Achieving a sustainable social impact through projects

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By Dr. Reinhard Wagner

INTRODUCTION

Projects are not a purpose in themselves. They require effort on the part of those involved and the deployment of - usually scarce - resources, and should therefore have a measurable impact. In some projects, this impact is primarily aimed at an economic benefit with a minimum of resource input or the avoidance of environmentally damaging consequences. In recent years, the social impact has increasingly become the focus of attention. [ISO 26000:2010](#) defines social responsibility as follows: "Social responsibility is responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour..." Of course, this also applies to projects. According to the standard, these should contribute to sustainable development and help to achieve one or more of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, taking into account the expectations of stakeholders. Sustainability refers, on the one hand, to the implementation of the projects or the handling of the people and resources involved in the project and, on the other hand, to the impact of the project in its social context. In the following, four examples will therefore show how the achievement of a sustainable social impact can be achieved by projects in practice. These should serve as inspiration and show a suitable path for the prevailing societal challenges. Certainly, these examples show only a small part of the repertoire that currently exists worldwide. However, these examples are often not familiar to everyone and are therefore to be brought "on stage" with this article.

¹ This is the fourth in a series of articles by Dr. 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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HACKING SOCIETAL CHALLENGES IN A CO-CREATIVE WAY

Hackdays, sometimes also called '[hackathons](#)', are an event frequently used in the programming scene to find novel approaches to solving challenges in an intensive competition lasting several days between different teams. At the end of the event, the solutions are presented and awards are given to the best of them. However, the event format is much more than just a co-creative competition. At the same time, it can be used as a form of learning to strengthen the readiness and capability for innovation within organizations as well as on the threshold from university education to professional life, respectively laying the foundation for the successful launch of a new business idea..

After the first positive experiences in 2020 during a virtual research conference of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) on the topic 'Projects as Arena for Self-Organizing', [IPMA Hackdays](#) will be held again in conjunction with the 10th IPMA Research Conference from June 19-21, 2022, in Belgrade (Serbia). This time the overall theme of the Research Conference is 'Value co-creation in the project society' and as a sub-theme the hackdays are themed 'Hacking societal challenges in a co-creative way'. Up to six teams of students from the Western Balkans compete against each other and work on one of the following topics: a.) climate action; b.) circular economy; c.) community development; d.) smart cities and smart rural; e.) e-governance & public service; f.) digital solution fighting COVID-19; g.) projects in the area of Health Care; and h.) mobility solutions for a new era. The ambition of the IPMA Hackdays is not only the shared experience in the context of co-creative collaboration but also a specific sketch of a solution, a prototype or concept that allows to master a self-selected challenge from the overall list and is mature enough to be implemented. At the end of the competition, a group of distinguished judges will evaluate all the solutions presented based on their experience and predefined criteria and select a winning group. The IPMA Hackdays are scientifically monitored and, following the event, the teams are offered coaching to help them transfer the outlined solutions or prototypes into practice and thus achieve the most sustainable social impact possible. Not only through the process of joint learning and co-creative working, but also through the implementation of their solutions in society.

Similar projects also take place at universities, for example at the [University of Applied Sciences in Augsburg](#), where I teach the subject of project management and specific projects are performed by the students. Here, concrete transfer projects are implemented with a social impact for a city or society on the topics of education, inclusion, mobility, digitalization of social services, urban gardening or sustainable waste treatment. This not only brings new learning for learners and teachers along with a transfer from the university to society, but also a tangible benefit.

IT'S ABOUT IMPACT, NOT DELIVERABLES OF A PROJECT

The next example is a program that was initiated in Nepal shortly after the devastating earthquake in spring 2015 during which thousands of people were killed and millions lost their homes. Financed by aid funds from the United Kingdom and Switzerland, [Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation](#) set to work to rebuild the destroyed houses as quickly as possible, but also to achieve a concrete social impact. Building on Helvetas' long experience in the country and also in other regions of the world, thought was given to how not only to rebuild the houses as sustainably as possible, but also to achieve education as sustainably as possible in the complex social structure of the country. Thus, a concept was developed in which a large number of houses could be rebuilt in a short time in an earthquake-resistant manner using materials that were as locally available and easy to process as possible. Based on a train-the-trainer concept, not only were trainers trained to construct earthquake-resistant buildings in the region threatened by earthquakes, but training was then offered over a period of several years, during which collapsed houses were rebuilt as part of the training. However, not only were 6,500 masons and 1,000 carpenters made fit in 50-day training sessions, but another goal was to place the trainees in long-term jobs following the training. The agencies that implemented the training program were given clear metrics by which they were to demonstrate the success of the project and then account for it. For example, job placement had to result in at least one year of employment, paying a minimum wage that enabled the workers to support their families. At the same time, the program was aimed primarily at disadvantaged social groups. Therefore, this is a good example of how excellent results can be achieved with intelligent concepts aimed at a sustainable social impact. These build on intelligent evaluation procedures that support the planning and monitoring of a project's specific social value, for example, the [Logical Framework Approach \(LFA\)](#). More about this in the next part of this series.

Another great example is the charity [Water Air Food Awards \(WAFA\)](#). WAFA's mission is to identify and promote outstanding sustainability entrepreneurs in the area of water, air, and food worldwide. These "silent heroes" beat the odds with breakthrough low-tech, high impact, local innovations for clean water, clean air and nutritious food for the poor and forgotten. WAFA acknowledges and promotes these low-cost solutions so they can be replicated and create significant social impact. Since 2010, WAFA has bestowed 14 Awards to silent heroes from Canada, China, Haiti India, Ireland Jordan Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe. Award-winners were chosen from 33 finalists from a group of 74 pre-selected candidates among 401 applicants from 82 countries on 4 continents. And these are just two examples from a multitude of worldwide, projects with social impact.

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY PROJECTS

In the Bavarian city of Augsburg, founded more than 2000 years ago by the Romans, lived more than 500 years ago the Fuggers, a rich merchant family, who, especially with Jakob Fugger, accumulated a wealth that is still unparalleled today. Jakob Fugger the Rich' not only supported the ruling family of the Habsburgs but also made a better life possible for the poor in his city through several foundation projects. The '[Fuggerei](#)', a settlement of more than 50 houses located in today's city, aimed to provide housing for needy elderly people, granted for one guilder (today Euro) together with three prayers per day. This offer is still valid today and quickly found imitators in Augsburg as well as in other cities in Germany.

For 25 years, Augsburg citizens have been working together in a '[Local Agenda 21](#)' process for sustainable development in Augsburg. Environmental and One World groups, educational and research institutions, church groups, representatives of the business community, the city administration and other organizations are all involved. Together they work for a sustainable and liveable city of Augsburg. The basic idea is cooperative urban development that is systematic, holistic, transparent, participatory and integrating. One example of corporate social responsibility in Augsburg is the soccer club, [FC Augsburg](#), which is represented in the top league and is a role model for social engagement in a number of lighthouse projects. For example, the club supports the local food bank, which distributes food to the needy, or physical activity games for children, a number of environmental projects in the region, or by providing warming rooms for the homeless. The strategy of the soccer club claims that "Soccer conveys values, shapes communities and is a social force that reaches many people. As a Bundesliga club, FC Augsburg is part of society and has a responsibility. That's why the club wants to get even more involved in the future in order to make a meaningful and good contribution to the common good as well as to environmental and climate protection."

All these are just a few perspectives on projects and project management that aim at a sustainable social impact and thus represent a change of perspective for the project management of the last seventy years, which tended to be focused on technology, methods and tools. Perhaps this article will inspire one or the other reader to follow suit.

About the Author



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Dr. 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 performed his doctoral thesis on the topic of Project Society. He can be contacted via reinhard.wagner@tiba.de.