

Let's talk about public projects! ^{1, 2}

Stanisław Gasik

“The most significant disruption of the 21st century (...) is the way organizations and COUNTRIES will be managed – through projects,” says Antonio Nieto Rodriguez (2022), one of the most influential contemporary thinking leaders.

So, countries – and their governments – need specific knowledge of project management. They should use this knowledge to improve the implementation of projects in their dependent organizations.

The Public Sector

A specific set of organizations are those which are subordinated – in different ways – to the government. Government is the parliament, responsible for all regulations in the state, and the cabinet, responsible for the implementation of these regulations and the efficient functioning of the state as a whole. The cabinet is made up of ministers who are responsible for their ministries (also called departments) and, through them, for certain areas of the state functioning. Ministries (and sometimes parliaments and cabinets as a whole) have their own agencies with specific tasks. For example, the control of medicines, companies' registration, or railway lines' development and maintenance. Ministries or agencies, in turn, can create specialized enterprises that perform specific activities. For example, road construction companies, hospitals, or railway companies. Enterprises whose main goal is to generate profit can also be created. For example, a state post office may set up a courier company. After all, state institutions can buy shares in listed companies (or hold shares in partially privatized state-owned companies).

In federal states, similar structures may exist for both the central level and the constituent states. In addition, local governments, which may have their own structure and subordinated organizations of various types, operate autonomously.

This is the public sector.

¹ Editor's note: This article is the first in a series related to the management of public programs and projects, those organized, financed and managed by governments and public officials. The author, Dr. Stanisław Gasik, is the author of the book “*Projects, Government, and Public Policy*”, recently published by CRC Press / Taylor and Francis Group. That book and these articles are based on Dr. Gasik's research into governmental project management around the world over the last decade. Stanisław is well-known and respected by PMWJ editors; we welcome and support his efforts to share knowledge that can help governments worldwide achieve their most important initiatives.

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The size, structure, and scope of operation of the public sector in each country are specific and result from its constitution, tradition, culture, environmental conditions, politics, and possibly other factors. Governments influence organizations from other sectors in other ways: by laws, norms, other regulations, contracts, financial incentives, etc.

Public Projects

Projects in which organizations from the public sector take part in management (not necessarily fully manage them) are called public projects. The most important of them may remain under the special supervision of government institutions. Such projects may be called in various ways like government projects or major projects (e.g., UK IPA, 2020). In turn, the most important government projects are national projects that may have legally defined priorities (e.g., NSW Parliament, 2021). The main role of governments is to create conditions (regulations, structures, processes...) for the effective implementation of public projects in their jurisdictions.

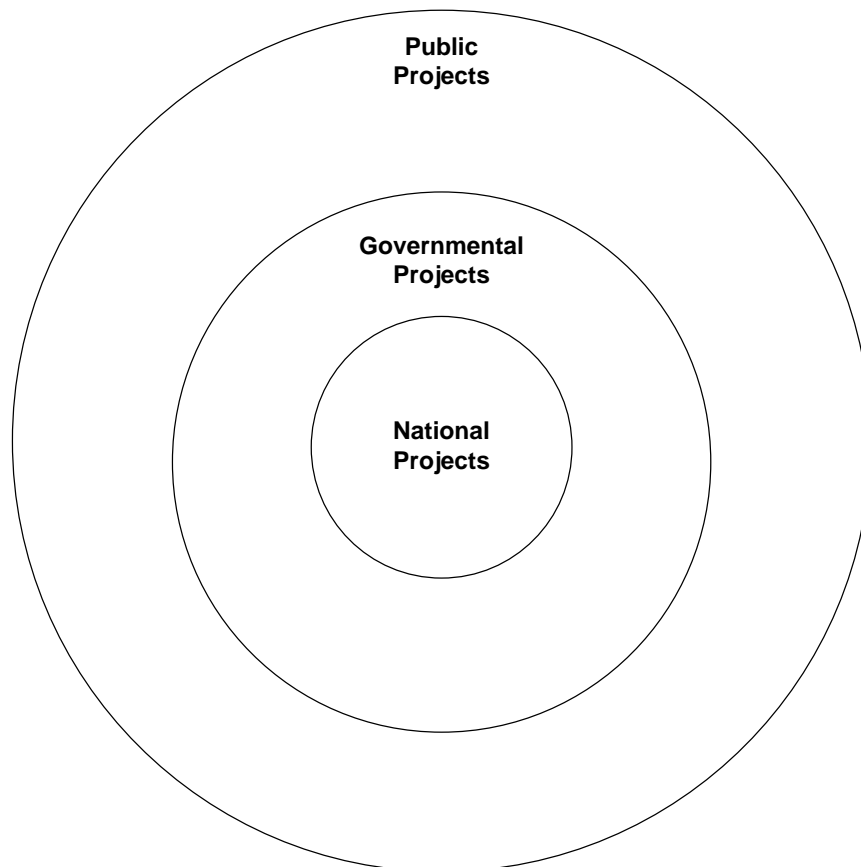


Figure 1. Categories of public projects

Governments have the potential to influence, regulate, or enforce project management practices in their public projects – at least in parts for which they are accountable. But some governments literally do nothing about project management. They just invest some money, are not interested in the way projects are managed, and expect outputs and results from their projects. On the opposite end, there are governments that have well-defined project management procedures and mechanisms for their continuous improvement.

Hence, knowledge on the role of governments in project management should be collected, systemized, and distributed among governments where, after tailoring to the local requirements and conditions, they may be successfully used. This was the goal that I established for myself a few years ago. I have found about 3 000 governmental-level project management practices in many countries and systemized them. The final result is the book “Projects, Government, and Public Policy” just published by Taylor and Francis (Gasik, 2023).

Specifics of the Public Sector

But is it worth paying attention just to public project management? Aren't they identical to projects of other sectors? The question to be answered first is: do public sector organizations differ from other sector organizations? Let us look at some characteristics.

First, in the public sector, the only truly autonomous organization is the government (for us the legislative and executive branches are especially important). And decisions at this level are made by political, not managerial bodies. The constituent organizations of the public sector mentioned above are subordinated – to the level specified by the constitution or other regulations – to central institutions. Organizations of other sectors are autonomous.

Secondly, profit is not the decisive factor in the functioning of public administrations. What is important there is ...what the public considers important. This is called “a public value” (Moore, 1995).

Some public values are common to most countries and others are specific to some of them. I have never met a country where a healthy life expectancy was not considered a value. So is internal and external security. But freedom of religion is an essential value in some countries and forbidden in others. Sports successes, particularly in specific disciplines (American football or ski jumping), are very important in some countries, less so in others, and not important in others. And besides, every citizen can have his or her own private preferences (values), which also cannot be disregarded.

Hence, due to the diversity and entanglement of public values, political mechanisms like elections and referendums are used for making major decisions. The public may wish for any projects to be implemented. The managerial parameters of projects under consideration by the public can be arguments in an election campaign, but if a project is chosen for implementation, it must be implemented, regardless of costs, risks, and other managerial parameters. In democratic countries, the public has the right to allocate its money for its preferred purpose. Political factors are much more important for – at least major – public projects than managerial ones.

Third (among many other differences), is the plethora of stakeholders. Public projects involve elements of public space that are of interest to many entities. Each citizen and any of their associations or groups may be influenced or interested in public projects. And plenty of institutions and organizations: media, politicians, political parties, audit chambers, parliaments, vendors, local governments... Different political parties may have, almost by the definition, different attitudes to particular projects.

For private companies, the owners (shareholders) and clients are the most important stakeholders.

So, it is worth dealing with public projects and their specifics.

Models of Project Inter-sectoral Differences

Does it mean that all processes and practices for public sector projects must be defined from scratch? In the area of public organizations – and projects are a type of organization – there are three schools of thought about cross-sector differences (Scott and Falcone, 1998). The first school groups together researchers who argue that there are no fundamental differences between public organizations and organizations in other sectors. This is the generic school. The opposite school says that "private and public organizations are alike in all unimportant respects." (Sayre, 1953). That is, they differ in all essential aspects. This is the core school. And the third school says that in some aspects public organizations are the same as others, and in others, they differ fundamentally. This is a dimensional school.

At the project level, the situation is specific. We are lucky to have the project management knowledge rather well-defined and codified. There are three basic items (portfolio, program, project) and ten project management knowledge areas (and maybe some others like knowledge management and business management) described by PMI documents having their own processes. This is not the case at the general organization level. So, we may look at these items and processes and analyze the needs for their differentiation for particular sectors.

Most project management practices are useful for all organizations. For example, methods of critical path building, RACI matrix, methods of WBS building, categories of reactions to risks, etc. Many core project management processes can be implemented in a similar way in both public and other sectors' projects.

But processes, where cross-sector differences are important, must be different. Just like project portfolio management is affected by at least two of three aforementioned differences: political factors, limited autonomy, and many public values. This is the project business level. Stakeholder management processes may have the same structure in all sectors (identify, plan, manage, monitor stakeholders, PMI, 2017), but the existing objects (like stakeholder register) differ significantly between sectors due to differences in project business environments. Similarities at the level of core practices and differences at the business level lead to defining the fourth, project-specific model of inter-sectoral differences: the layered one.

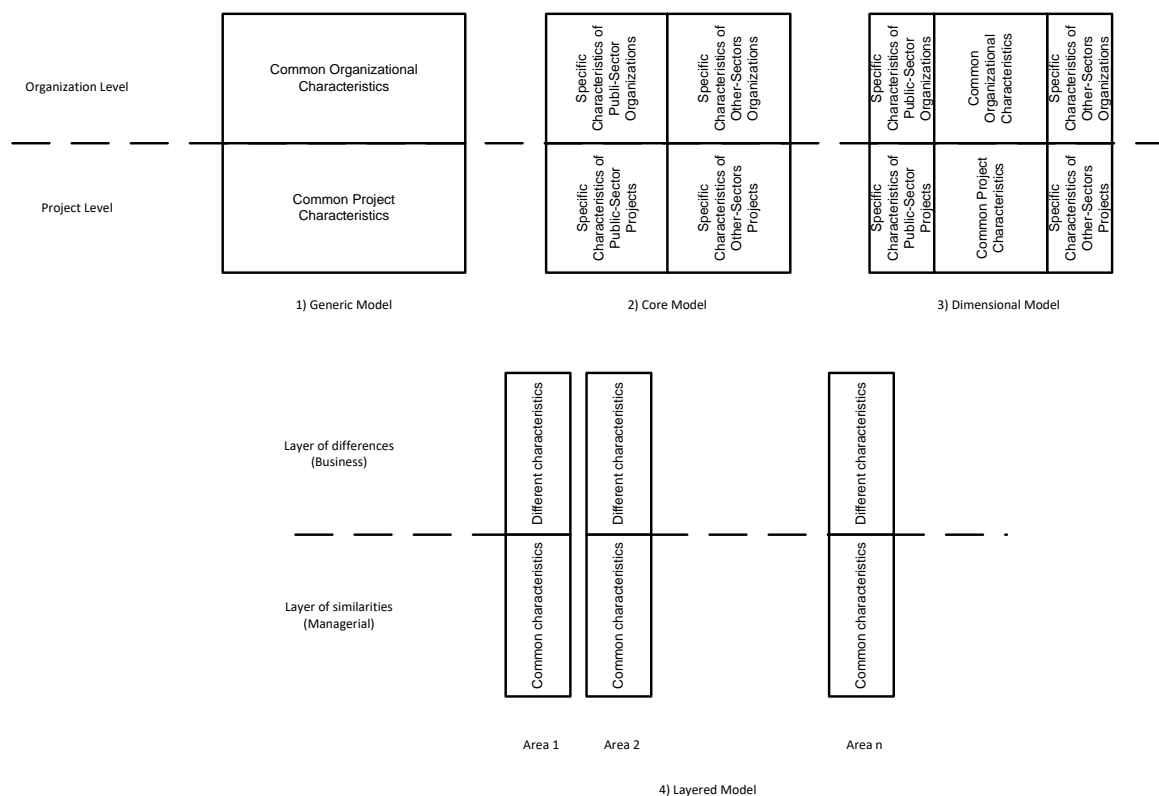


Figure 2. Models of differences between the public sector and other sector organizations and projects (source: Gasik, 2023)

I was very pleased with the suggestion of the editor of PM World Journal (thank you, David Pells!) and I intend to describe various issues related to public projects and especially the role of governments in their management in a series of publications here, in PM World Journal. In future articles, I will elaborate on the above topics and describe specific issues, needs, and practices for governmental and public projects.

This series of articles is intended to be useful for governments in most countries, and at the national, state, and local levels. I believe they may also be useful for supranational institutions working on development and improving project management capabilities in different countries.

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Dr. Stanisław Gasik, PMP is a project management expert. He graduated from the University of Warsaw, Poland, with M. Sc. in mathematics and Ph. D. in organization sciences (with a specialty in project management). Stanisław has over 30 years of experience in project management, consulting, teaching, and implementing PM organizational solutions. His professional and research interests include project knowledge management, portfolio management, and project management maturity. He is the author of the only holistic model of project knowledge management spanning from the individual to the global level.

Since 2013, his main professional focus has been on public projects. He was an expert in project management at the Governmental Accountability Office, an institution of the US Congress. He is the author of "[Projects, Government, and Public Policy](#)," a book that systematizes knowledge about government activities in the area of project management.

He was a significant contributor to PMI's PMBOK® Guide and PMI Standard for Program Management and contributed to other PMI standards. He has lectured at global PMI and IPMA congresses and other international conferences.

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