

*Let's talk about public projects*¹

On Public Sector Programs²

Stanisław Gasik

Introduction

In this article, I would like to compare the meaning of the term "program" in public administration and in the project management environment. Do the terms have the same meaning in both environments? Can the recommendations developed in the project management environment be applied to all public programs? Behind this question is also another one: does the project management community sufficiently consider the needs of public administration in its standards? I will take as my subject of analysis primarily US federal programs and the concept of the program as defined by the Project Management Institute.

What Is a Program?

In the public administration environment, **a program is a set of instruments that implement a certain public policy** (e.g. Howlett and Rayner, 2013; Barnett and Shore, 2009). Instruments can be in the nature of **continuous processes** (e.g., tax collection) or **projects** (e.g., road construction). An even broader definition, which does not limit the concept of a program to public administration, says that it is "**a set of related measures or activities with a particular long-term goal**" (<https://brainly.com/question/20451510>). Also, the Merriam-webster dictionary indicates that it is adequate for our discussion to understand this concept as "**a plan or system under which action may be taken toward a goal**" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/program>).

None of these understandings of the "program" term limits its components to projects.

¹ Editor's note: This article is the second 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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Programs in Public Administration

Let us consider some examples of US federal programs.

Operational Programs

"Operation" is an activity aimed at obtaining value from owned assets; most often they are permanent, continuous processes. In the private sector, value is mainly the profit. But values in the public sector are perceived differently: they are anything considered important by the public (Moore, 1995). They are called "public values".

For example, the Social Security program "provides protection against the loss of earnings due to retirement, death, or disability". Its FY 2022 budget was USD 1.196 trillion (<https://www.ssa.gov/oact/progdata/index.html>) and for budget data: (<https://www.thebalancemoney.com/u-s-federal-budget-breakdown-3305789>).

Another very costly program is Medicare – an insurance program for people aged 65 or older. (<https://www.ssa.gov/benefits/medicare/>). Its budget in 2022 was \$766 billion.

Medicaid provides health coverage to millions of Americans (...). The program is funded jointly by states and the federal government; Its 2022 budget was USD 571 billion. (<https://www.medicaid.gov/medicaid/index.html>).

The objectives of the three above-mentioned programs are just producing public value: social security or health. They are among the biggest US federal US programs. The most important components of all these three programs are continuous operations, mainly payments – direct or indirect – of certain sums to eligible persons. From the managerial point of view, they are operations.

We will call such programs "**operational programs**" (Gasik, 2023). A program of this type is schematically presented in

Figure 1.

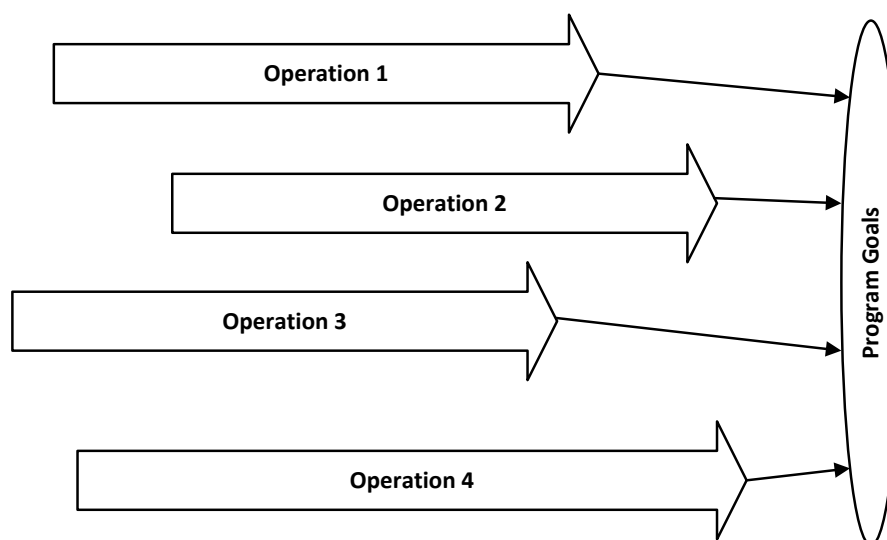


Figure 1. Operational Program

Please note that the arrows in

Figure 1 show causal, not temporal relations. Achieving the goal by performing an operation does not necessarily mean the ending of a given operation. Achieving gender equality in the level of wages paid does not mean the end of paying wages.

Project Programs

There are also programs of other types. For instance, the F-35 program, which aims to provide joint strike fighters, strengthens national security, enhances global partnerships, and powers economic growth (<https://www.f35.com/f35/about.html>). This program consists of projects.

The same with the U.S. Navy's DDG-51 and DDG-1000 Destroyer Programs (<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/weapons/RL32109.pdf>) that have the objective of delivering military ships. Or a well-known Apollo program consisting of projects to send spacecraft and culminating in the landing of men on the moon.

Such programs consist mainly of projects, hence we will call them “**project programs**” (Gasik, 2023). A program of this type is schematically presented in Figure 2.

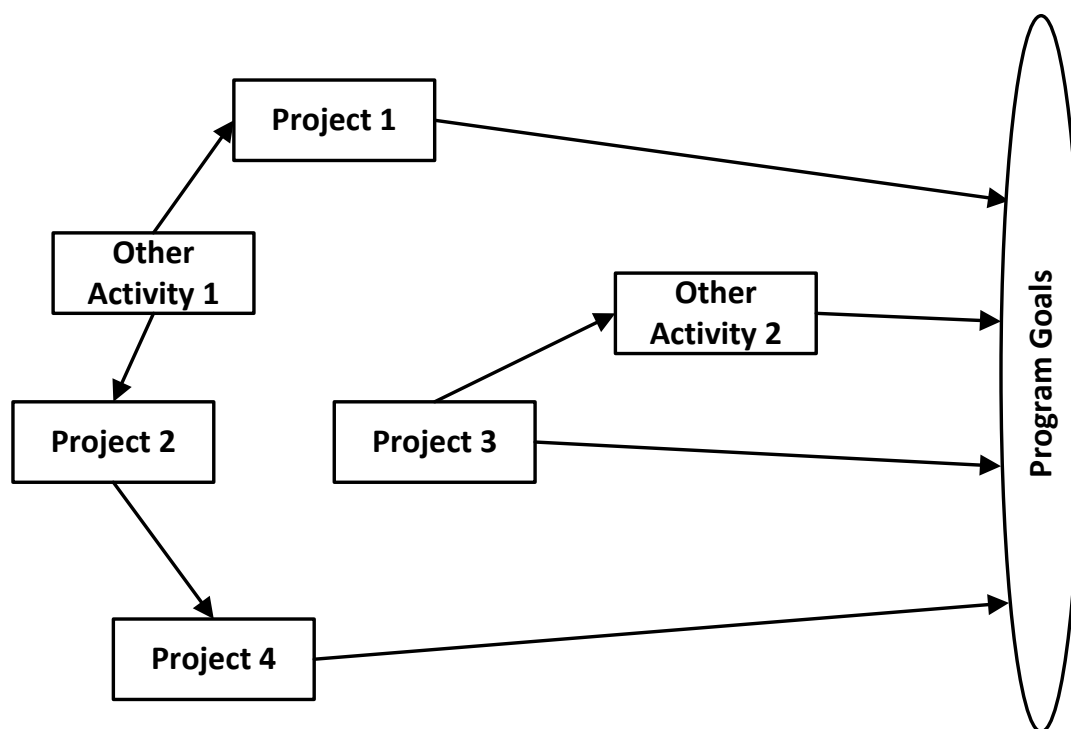


Figure 2. Project Program

Mixed Programs

And there is the third type of programs, like the Federal-aid Highway Program (<https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/federal-aidessentials/federalaid.cfm>) which “provides financial assistance for the construction, maintenance, and operations of the Nation's

3.9 million-mile highway network”. This program consists of construction (projects) and operations of highways.

The ecological Conservation Reserve Program (CRP, <https://www.fsa.usda.gov/programs-and-services/conservation-programs/conservation-reserve-program/>) consists, among others, of “creating critical habitat” for several species (projects) and “planting species that will improve environmental health and quality.” (operations).

These are examples of “mixed programs” as they consist of both projects and operations (see Figure 3).

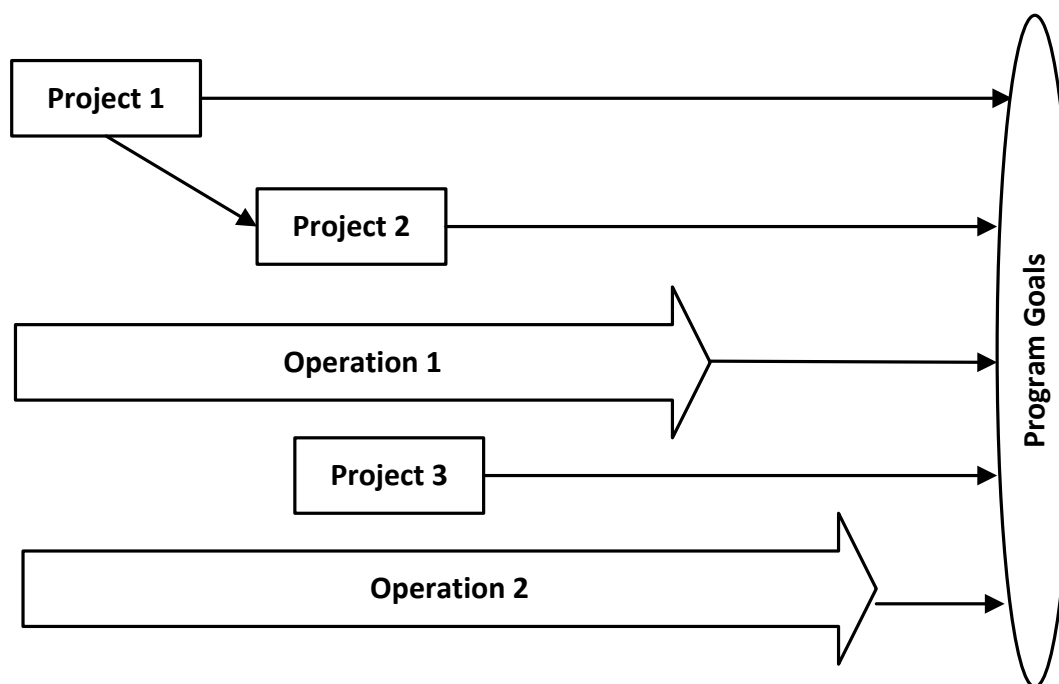


Figure 3. Mixed Program

Programs in Project Management Environment

What is a program according to Project Management Standard? This is “related project, subsidiary programs, and program activities managed in a coordinated manner to obtain benefits not available from managing them individually” (PMI, 2017a). And program activities are listed and described in chapter 8. Program Activities of this document. There are 17 program activities, starting from Program Formulation Activities (point 8.1.1) and ending with Program Risk Management Transition (point 8.3.5).

Hence, project programs are obviously the main object of interest for PMI documents.

The operational programs that consume the largest part of the budget in many countries, including the USA, are outside the scope of PMI interest as they do not include any projects. While this is inconvenient for government employees, who would probably like to have a single guideline for all program implementation, this is justified by the PMI's object of interest – these are projects and their aggregates.

But what about mixed programs? Are they an object of interest for PMI? For this purpose, we must more carefully analyze definitions and explanations provided by PMI documents.

First, what is an operation? PMI does not provide a definition of this concept; hence we assume that they follow the generally accepted definition cited above. Let us analyze some statements from the PMI Standard for Program Management.

“Operational activities or maintenance functions that are directly related to a program’s components may be considered as other program-related activities” (p. 4). Let us notice that this explanation is inconsistent with the above-cited definition which allows only program activities and not “program-related activities” to be components of programs. This is confirmed in the first part of the explanation of the term “program-related activities”: these are training, (...) administration”. Also, operations and maintenance “directly related to program’s components” may be components of programs. But operations generating the goals of the whole program by themselves are not mentioned here. The body of the document also confirms that project-independent operations may not be components of (mixed) programs. The program manager’s actions include, among others, “Lead and coordinate program activities (for example, financing and procurement) (...)” (point 1.3). He/she is not responsible for any operations. “Program management focuses on (...) delivery of benefits derived from the pursuit of a group of projects and other programs (...)” (point 1.4). Operations are also not mentioned here.

In a project management environment, shaped mainly by the PMI community and its standards, programs consist mainly of projects. Operations, especially those not related directly to projects, may not be components of programs.

It means that, if a program has a structure similar to the above-cited Conservation Reserve Program the operational activities of planting species are not a component of the PMI program. I.e., the whole program of this type is out of PMI documents’ area of interest. If all the program is excluded from PMI’s area of interest, their component projects are also excluded. This is a big problem.

The structure of managerial objects in an organization is schematically shown in Figure 4³.

Some practices, such as WBS construction, can be applied to projects that are part of mixed programs. But, since they are part of programs not included in the PMI activity structure, PMI documents cannot be used to manage their "external" functions, such as their role in the functioning of an organization.

³ This diagram does not illustrate the relationship between public organizations and their overarching organization, i.e. the government.

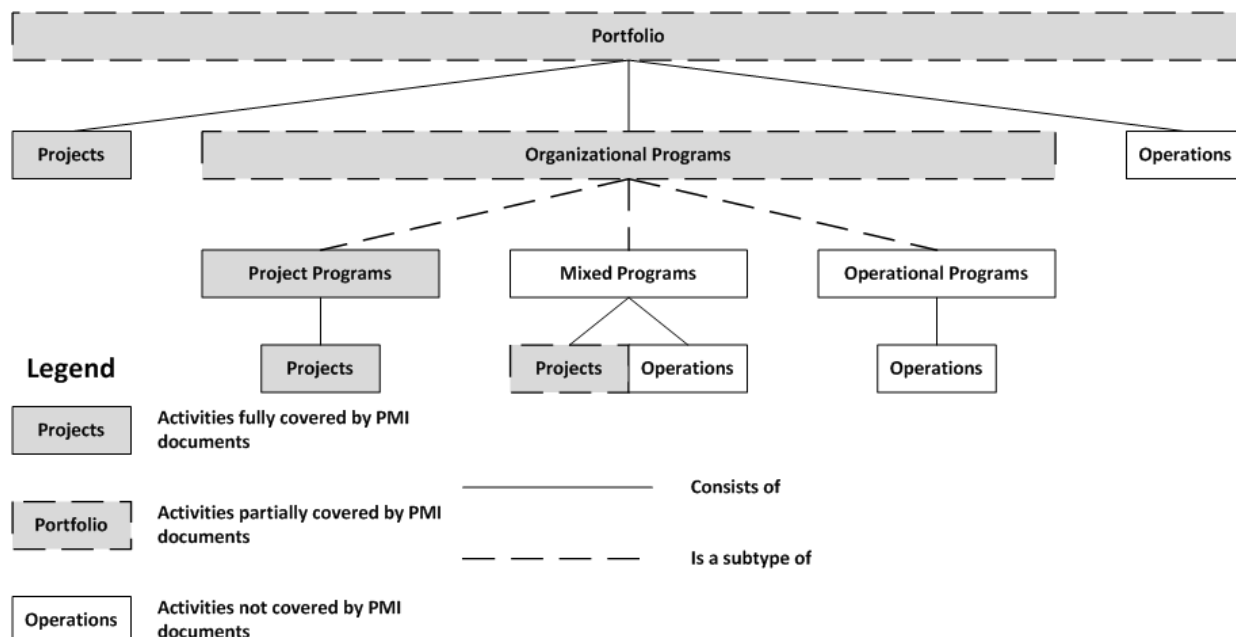


Figure 4. Structure of managerial objects in organization

Programs as Boundary Objects

The concept of a program in the field of public administration is not the same as the concept behind the same name used by project management specialists.

Hence, professionals in these two areas of operation may have problems communicating with each other. This will be to the detriment of the public administration (because it will not be able to use project management knowledge). But does this mean that the administration should change its understanding of the program concept? No, they have understood programs this way for many years, even earlier than project managers. Or should the project management people change their understanding of programs? That's not a good solution either, because for "their" programs, consisting virtually exclusively of projects, the project management community has developed a great deal of knowledge, among others included in PMI or Axelos documents.

The situation is difficult. **Knowledge management specialists call the objects used in many areas "boundary objects"** (e.g., Carlile, 2002; Fong, 2003). Establishing a common understanding is often a challenge for parties working together. And the lack of a common understanding can be a serious problem for joint work between specialists in different fields. **A "program" is just such a "boundary object" used both in the public administration and project management environment.**

But if one were to change his/her definition or understanding of the term it should rather be done by the group that works for the other. And it is the project management community that is supposed to provide the means of achieving goals, among others, for the public administration, not the other way around, although the government

should support the implementation of its projects (about which I recently wrote a book, Gasik, 2023).

It seems that the definition given above is the broadest:

A program is a set of related measures or activities with a particular long-term aim.

Conclusions

The issue of including operations and mixed programs in the scope of PMI's focus is not just a change in the definition written in one sentence. The Standard for Portfolio Management (PMI, 2017b) explicitly claims to include operations as well. Moreover, according to this document, "the portfolio components are also managed based on standards, such PMBOK®Guide, and the Standard for Program Management" (PMI, 2017b, point 1.9, page 11). But no standard for operations is mentioned there. So, not all the portfolio components are managed based on standards. For this to be said of operations, one would have to refer to a specific operation management standard – or PMI would have to develop such a canon of knowledge. And the work to include operations in PMI aggregates doesn't stop even there. If in a program there would be projects and operations independent of each other, connected only by the program objective, it would be necessary to define practices for their joint management. The first function to consider might be reporting. The Standard for Program Management (point 7.2.2.3) identifies Earned Value Analysis as the basis for reporting. But EVA was developed for projects, not operations. It would therefore be necessary to develop a common way of reporting progress for projects and operations. Similarly with other areas of management: it would be necessary to identify or develop practices for common management of costs, personnel, risks, and other management areas indicated, for example, in the PMBOK® Guide (PMI, 2017c).

It should be considered whether a separate program management standard should not be developed for the public sector. Or we should consider whether there are non-project programs also in the private sector and extend the whole standard accordingly.

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About the Author



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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.

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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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