

On the Subject of Programs¹

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

9 August 2023

Ref: Kerzner, H. and Zeitoun, A. (2023). The Program Way, The Great Project Management Accelerator, series article, *PM World Journal*, Vol. XII, Issue VIII, August. Available online at <https://peworldlibrary.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/pmwj132-Aug2023-Kerzner-Zeitoun-the-program-way.pdf>

Dear David,

When reading the August issue of *PM World Journal*, a paper by Dr. Kerzner and Dr. Al. Zeitoun caught my attention. This is a very interesting paper. However, I have one general comment. What is a program? You were kind enough to publish my papers on programs, especially in public administration, in the February, March, and April issues of *PM World Journal* (Gasik 2023a, 2023b, 2023c). Since programs are the most important units of work in public administration, you can also find a considerable amount of information on this topic in my book "Projects, Government, and Public Policy" (Gasik, 2023d).

For the Project Management Institute (PMI, 2017) and the Authors of the discussed article, a program may consist only of projects.

But as I wrote in the February article (Gasik, 2023a):

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>).

I will call it the "General definition (of program)".

If we assume that projects are "instruments" or "a set of related measures" or "actions" in the general definitions, then the PMI definition meets the general definition – but not the other way around. PMI program is a special case of the general program.

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Several definitions of the term program used in the US federal administration are included in the US Government Glossary of Terms (<https://irp.fas.org/doddir/dod/usg-glossary.pdf>). All of them are in line with the PMI definition i.e., they restrict the concept of a program to a group of projects. But let us look at practice.

The US federal administration “directly assists domestic governments, organizations, or individuals. (...) The assistance (...) is provided and administered (...) through special programs to recipients” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Administration_of_federal_assistance_in_the_United_States). You may find a list of these programs on the same page. And it is difficult to find programs consisting only of projects on this list. Look at Child and Adult Care Food Program “(...) provides a daily subsidized food service for an estimated 3.3 million children and 120,000 elderly or mentally or physically impaired adults”. Daily services are continuous operations, not projects. Pell Grant from the same list “is a subsidy the U.S. federal government provides for students who need it to pay for college.” Operations. Nutrition Assistance for Puerto Rico “the program has been providing low-income families, living in Puerto Rico, with cash for food purchases.”. Operations. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families is “program, providing cash assistance to indigent American families”. Also operations. All other administrations I know of also implement programs consisting not only of projects.

Following requirements of the Program Improvement and Accountability Act (US Congress, 2015) Government Accountability Office prepares lists of “programs identified as high risk” (e.g., <https://www.gao.gov/high-risk-list>). It is difficult to find programs consisting only of projects there.

From this, we can conclude that, in its practice, the US public administration does not limit the concept of a program to a narrow understanding of the PMI definition. They practically apply the general definition of a program. Probably this is true also for organizations from other sectors.

How to resolve this problem? A classification of programs should be introduced. There are three main types of programs: **project programs** (PMI definition), **operational programs** (consisting solely of operations), and **mixed programs** (consisting of operations and projects) (Gasik, 2023d).

The Program Way advocated by Dr. Kerzner and Dr Al Zeitoun is appropriate only for project programs. This should be clearly worded. For these kinds of programs, it will be very useful.

Generally, in the future, we should consequently use the term “project program” for programs meeting the PMI definition to avoid misinterpretations. And we should not forget that projects are also components of mixed programs.

References

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Best regards,

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