

*Let's talk about public projects*¹

Citizens' participation in public projects²

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Introduction

Public projects are executed with the involvement of public institutions to address the needs of society or specific groups within it. The public can directly benefit from the outcomes of these projects, such as the construction of roads, infrastructure development, the hosting of sports or cultural events, or improvements in educational programs. These projects are referred to as **direct public projects**. On the other hand, projects like the restructuring of public institutions offer benefits to the public indirectly, making them **indirect public projects**. Indirect projects include those in which citizens cannot be involved in any way, like those related to defense or intelligence activities. These are categorized as **classified projects**.

Public projects involve numerous stakeholders, for instance, contractors, politicians, and audit chambers. However, the most distinguished and arguably the most crucial group among them is the citizens of the country. There's a broad range of citizen groups that can play roles as stakeholders in public projects, collectively known as public stakeholders. The most general category among them is the general public, as they have a stake in any public project since these projects are funded by citizens' taxes. Another type of public stakeholders includes the beneficiaries of these projects. In the case of the largest projects or programs, the entire public can be viewed as the beneficiaries. A prime example of such a project is a nationwide election, where all eligible citizens have the right to express their will by selecting the most significant public representatives. Similarly, substantial infrastructure investments (e.g., constructing major airports), healthcare system reform, or projects to establish nationwide legislation have a significant impact on society as a whole. The beneficiaries of public projects can also be specific groups of citizens. The stakeholders of a school construction project are the residents of a particular neighborhood, and the same holds true for local transportation investments, such as

¹ Editor's note: This article is the eleventh 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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constructing a local road or railroad, which primarily benefit local residents (though they may also pose problems for some of them, such as increased noise and pollution). The same principle applies to local cultural events. Due to the customization of public projects to meet the needs of individual citizens in the Service Tailoring phase of social development (Gasik, 2023c), the beneficiary of a public project can be an individual citizen.

The management of public projects should establish the frameworks and procedures for the involvement of public stakeholders. In certain projects, they should have a guaranteed ability to influence the selection of these projects – I discussed this in my article for PM World Journal (Gasik, 2023b). This level of involvement varies from the absence of public stakeholder participation to the direct expression of their preferences through participation in referendums.

This article focuses on the participation of public stakeholders in the execution of public projects, specifically from the point when the decision to carry out a project is made until its completion.

Getting organized for participation

Engaging individual citizens in projects typically lacks the influence to significantly shape how projects are carried out. Greater impact is achieved when groups of citizens exert their influence on projects through designated representatives.

The execution of public projects can lead to the emergence of interest groups associated with a particular project. For instance, residents of a specific neighborhood might create a pressure group regarding the construction of a supermarket. Citizens with specific viewpoints may establish advocacy groups for projects involving the relaxation or tightening of abortion laws.

Project stakeholders can also include pre-existing associations formed before project implementation. For example, stakeholders in road construction projects might encompass environmental groups and associations, as well as groups or associations representing drivers and road users. Stakeholders in sports-related projects, such as organizing championships or the Olympics, include sports associations, while projects related to the industry involve associations of producers.

Levels of public stakeholder inclusion

The fundamental principles of participation in public projects should be transparency, inclusivity, and meaningfulness. Transparency means that information related to project implementation is accessible to project stakeholders. Inclusivity involves incorporating as many relevant stakeholder groups as possible in project implementation, either directly or through elected representatives. Meaningfulness refers to taking into consideration the opinions and will of public stakeholders in the project implementation process.

However, is it suitable and feasible to fulfill these requirements in every type of project? There are varying degrees of involving community representatives in project implementation, with four primary types:

- Non-informing
- Informing
- Consulting
- Deciding

I will discuss these types further in the subsequent sections of the article. The purpose of this article is not to offer an exhaustive description of all potential forms of citizen participation in ongoing projects but to provide a broad overview of these forms.

Non-informing

Citizens do not have information about the project's plans and status.

Most public projects are characterized by openness and transparency. However, transparency is excluded in classified projects. For instance, some defense-related projects or those carried out by intelligence agencies fall into this category. In such projects, details regarding project implementation, and sometimes even the mere existence of the project, cannot be disclosed beyond the project team. In specific instances, individual project teams may not have knowledge of the activities of other teams or the overall project's purpose. An example of this approach is the Manhattan Project, whose objective was to develop an atomic bomb (Gosling, 2010).

Informing

The project team shares information with citizens.

Citizens have the ability to access information about public projects either in person or through media outlets that provide information access.

Many governments have enacted laws related to informing citizens about how the government operates, typically known as Freedom of Information Acts (e.g., US Congress, 1996; UK Parliament, 2000; NSW Parliament, 1989). Since projects are an integral part of government operations, they are therefore subject to regulations of this nature.

To begin with, citizens can write a letter or send an email to the project team to ask questions. This represents a non-institutionalized method of contacting the project. However, projects typically develop more structured means of informing the public.

Internet tools

Presently, the most widely used method for communicating the progress of public projects is through various internet tools. Project plans and updates are typically

shared on project portals or social media platforms. This information can be presented in the form of reports or blogs authored by authorized members of the project team. Portals also serve as a means to distribute educational materials outlining the project's advantages.

Numerous countries have a multitude of portals that detail portfolios of public projects and their status. For instance, the UK Infrastructure and Project Authority provides information on Major Project Portfolios (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/major-projects-data>).

The US state of Vermont offers information on construction projects (<https://vtrans.vermont.gov/projects>). New Zealand showcases its digital government projects (<https://www.digital.govt.nz/digital-government/programmes-and-projects/>). In Argentina, information on public projects is consolidated in the Public Investment Project Bank (BAPIN, <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/dnip/bapin>). Even for military projects, certain information may be available (e.g., F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, <https://www.f35.com/f35/index.html>).

Direct access to information

In this method of providing information, project documents are accessible to the public. Any citizen can request access to the content of any information medium, whether in paper or traditional form, related to public matters (e.g., NC General Assembly, 1935, with various amendments), including project implementation. Plans, reports, or other documents of interest to citizens are accessible. Another approach is to allow citizen participation, typically in a passive role, in project status meetings (e.g. OMAG Maryland, 2021). This way, they can attend the most crucial meetings and become acquainted with the decisions taken and the decision-making process.

Open Houses

Another worth mentioning way of offering direct insight into project implementation is through what is commonly known as "Open Houses," primarily used in large infrastructure projects. Interested citizens are given access to the project implementation area. Specific rooms are designated for this purpose, showcasing the progress achieved thus far. This may include design or mock-ups of the constructed facilities. Another approach involves creating observation areas, such as terraces, from which the work's progress is visible. Representatives from the contractors provide information about the project and engage in discussions with visitors.

For example, the Western Sydney Airport Project operates an Experience Center where residents can visit and get acquainted with the project and its status (<https://westernsydney.com.au/your-airport/experience-centre>). Open Houses can also take a virtual form, as seen in the case of The Port Infrastructure Improvement Project in Cambridge, Massachusetts (<https://www.cambridgema.gov/Departments/publicworks/news/2023/03/theportinfrastructureimprovementprojectvirtualopenhouse>).

Other ways of informing

Citizens can also receive updates on project status through other means. In larger projects, project representatives, often known as media spokespersons, are designated for this role. Projects conduct meetings where they provide updates on the project's status and its progress. Articles about the projects are published in both traditional and online media, and traditional project information boards are set up.

Consulting

The entities managing the project solicit feedback from citizens and, based on this input, make decisions regarding the project's execution. In this mode of public engagement, it falls upon the authorized project bodies to determine how to incorporate the obtained opinions.

Information sharing can transition into consulting if the manner in which project information is conveyed permits or encourages the recipients of the information to voice their opinions. For instance, project portals might feature blogs specifically designed for citizens to express their views.

Individual consultations

An informal way of seeking input is for citizens to send their comments or opinions to the project team. Similar to the Informing phase, any citizen can write a letter to the project team at any time and provide suggestions regarding the project's execution.

To formalize the process of gathering comments or opinions about projects, specific periods can be established during which the project team presents particular matters, and related documents, and awaits public feedback on them. Additionally, discussion forums focusing on project implementation can be established.

For particularly significant issues concerning project implementation, public surveys are conducted. This allows the public to express their opinions and preferences.

Citizen Council

A Citizen Council is a group of individuals, independent of governmental project management structures, tasked with representing project stakeholders and advocating on their behalf. The Citizen Council should be integrated into the project's governance framework and may include representatives of both beneficiaries and those with concerns about the project's impact. Additionally, the Council can encompass domain experts invited by other public stakeholders. The Citizen Council should possess information about the project's progress at a level of detail it deems suitable. The Council conveys its opinions on the project's execution and can present them to both the project administrators and other stakeholders, including the general public and project beneficiaries.

During the planning phase, the Council can play a particularly crucial role by proposing preferred methods of implementation and exerting influence on project outcomes.

Deciding

Citizens or their representatives can play a role in the project's decision-making process. The two primary methods for facilitating such involvement are:

- Direct citizen participation in determining the project's parameters, particularly its scope.
- Incorporating representatives into governance structures.

Direct citizen participation

In the consulting mode, public representatives offer their opinions on the project, which are then assessed by members of the project team. Based on this input, the team makes decisions. Conversely, in the direct participation mode, citizens determine how the project will be executed, and project team members are consulted to ensure that the proposed solutions align with the project parameters (such as budget or schedule).

There are project types in which the involvement of public representatives holds particular significance. For example, in projects related to social activation, citizens have the opportunity to specify their preferred forms of engagement in professional activities, poverty alleviation, or cultural events. This occurs during the project's execution. Representatives of the community are actively engaged in the process of identifying their needs, setting priorities, and designing solutions. They are empowered to make decisions. For instance, if the project's objective is professional activation, unemployed individuals can specify the type of training they require. This approach to project implementation is referred to as "bottom-up" (e.g., Sabatier, 1986; Black, 2002).

Including in governance structures

A Project Board is a body that oversees the execution of a project at a high level. Typically, for instance, as per Prince2®, it comprises the Sponsor, representatives of the contractors, and representatives of the project beneficiaries. In direct public projects, these are the individuals for whom the project is being carried out. The Project Board members' method of involvement is detailed in the project's governance procedures. They possess direct knowledge of the project's implementation status. Based on this knowledge and an understanding of social expectations, they provide their input on the project's execution and plans. The Sponsor holds responsibility for making the most critical decisions in the project. When making decisions, the sponsor takes into consideration the perspectives of both citizens' representatives and project contractors. Inclusion in governance structures may complement the direct involvement of citizens in the project.

However, since project management necessitates specific professional qualifications and accountability for public institution budgets, they usually don't assume the role of project managers.

Summary

There are varying degrees of involving citizens in the execution of public projects. However, it's crucial to remember that there are public projects in which citizen involvement is not feasible. This category includes, for instance, military and intelligence projects.

In indirect public projects, the public should receive information about their existence, budget, scope, milestones, risks, and other management-related aspects.

The extent of citizen or representative participation in project implementation fluctuates throughout different phases of project execution. In projects that impact the natural environment, such as infrastructure or those related to the extraction of natural resources, obtaining permits is usually necessary before commencing work, and these permits cannot be altered during the work's progress. Consequently, citizen consultations are typically feasible only before obtaining permits. In later phases of the project, citizen representatives should be kept informed about the project's status and progress.

Consulting on the implementation of a project without involving public representatives in the decision-making process is suitable, for example, in new product development (NPD) projects, research projects, or artistic projects. In such projects, the decision-makers retain full autonomy. Citizen involvement in the project may also conclude at this stage if they lack a comprehensive understanding of the conditions governing its execution. This situation may arise when the project is part of a program with a broader impact than just the local level.

Incorporating representatives into governance structures is suitable for direct public projects, such as those related to welfare, healthcare, education, or culture. Another reason for including representatives of the public in decision-making bodies may be the necessity to keep a watchful eye on custodians of the public budget.

The appropriate level of involvement of citizen representatives in public projects is one of the most critical factors contributing to their success.

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