

## *Let's talk about public projects*<sup>1</sup>

# Two research perspectives on public projects<sup>2</sup>

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## Introduction

The main areas of organized activity in each country are the private sector, non-governmental sector and, which is our area of interest, the public sector. Public administration operates within the public sector. **Public administration has many definitions (cf. Gasik, 2023), one of them says that it is the management of public programs** (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2009). Regardless of the definition, public programs are the basic unit of public administration activity because they implement **public policies**. Public programs (and public policies) are divided into operational, project and mixed (Gasik, *ibid*).

Projects in each sector play a supporting role in achieving the goals of this sector.

The connections between sectors of activity and projects are shown in Figure 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: This series of articles is 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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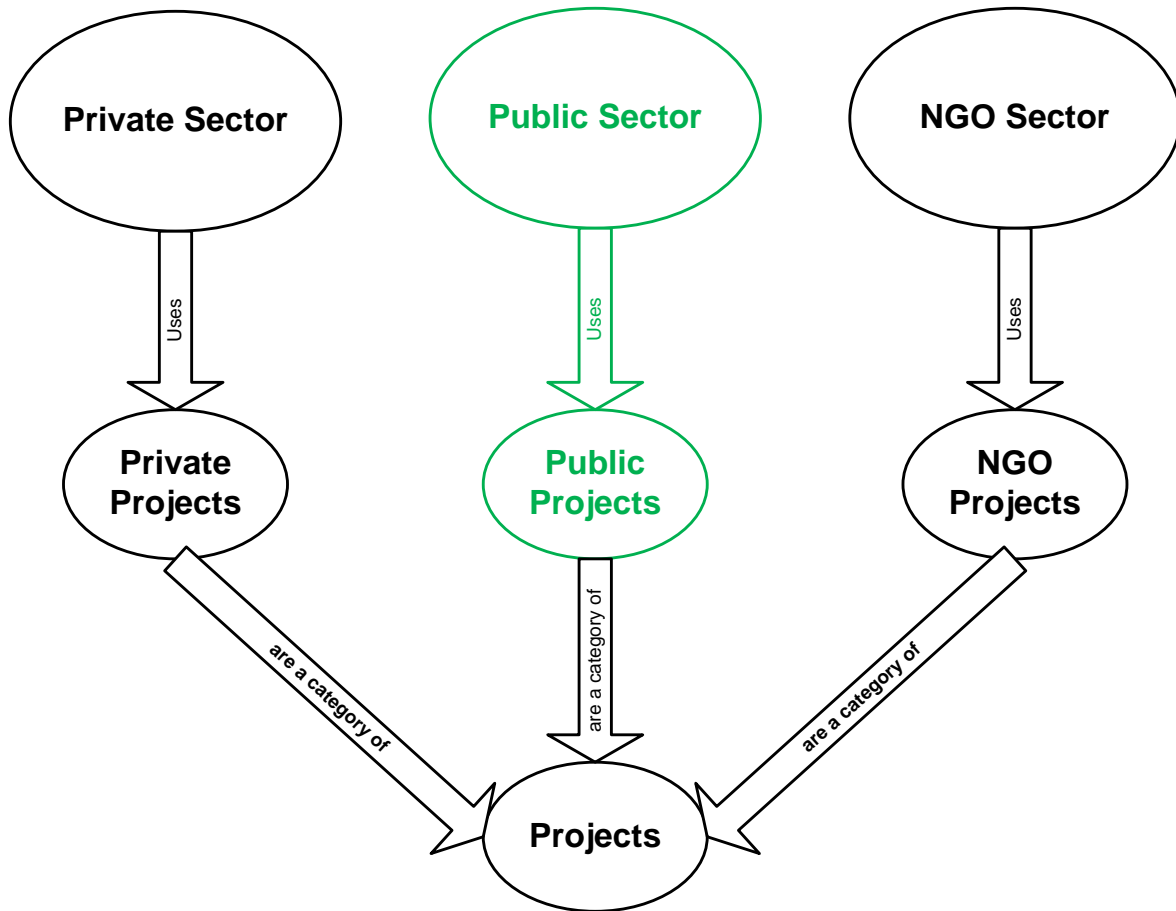


Figure 1. Sectors and projects

After zooming in on the green section on project use in the public sector, it turns out that there are actually public policies and the public programs that implement them, as shown in Figure 2.

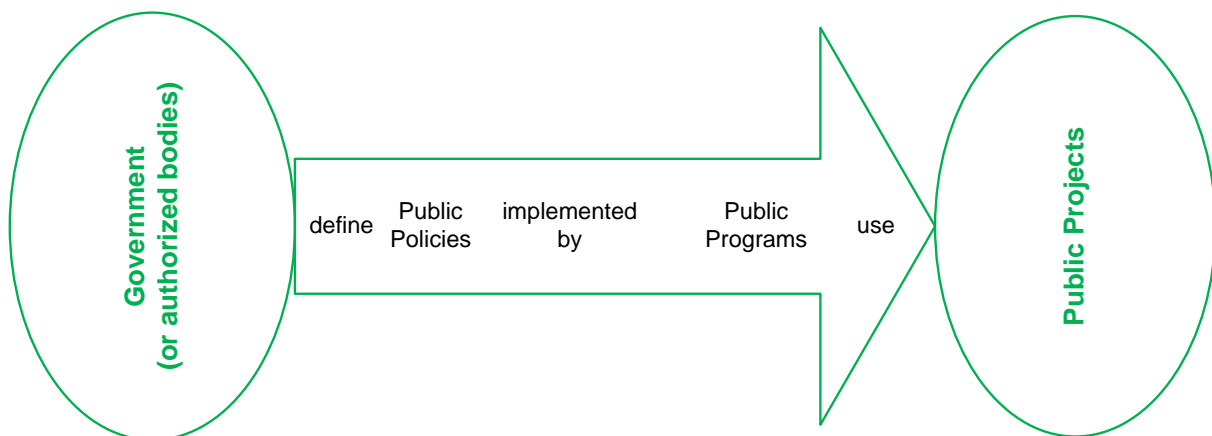


Figure 2. Public projects – detailed view

Each business sector and project management are studied by science. General project management research deals with the features common to all sectors. Public

project research explores and creates common project management knowledge and knowledge specific to public projects. This knowledge is created by both public administration (PA) and project management (PM) researchers. Is this knowledge consistent?

In this article, we will first analyze how PM researchers relate to the existence of differences between public projects and those of other sectors, that is, whether they recognize the separation of public projects as a separate area of research. Then we will refer to public sector projectification research. Finally, we will analyze a sample of articles from leading PA and PM journals for interest in public projects searching for papers on public project management.

## **PM researchers' approach to the specifics of public sector projects**

Gasik (2016) empirically showed that public projects differ significantly from projects in other sectors, in particular in the areas of stakeholder management, procurement management, and communications management. There are also significant differences in the areas of HR management, scope management, integrity management, cost management, time management, and risk management. The only area where there are virtually no inter-sectoral differences is quality management. Project management researchers approach these differences in different ways. There are four basic approaches:

- **The Denying Differences Stream**

Researchers who analyze public projects and they formulate conclusions in a general manner, not stating that they are valid only for public projects or suggesting that they are valid for any projects (e.g., Chapman, 2016; Duffield & Whitty, 2016)

- **The Public Projects' Research Stream**

Researchers conducting studies on public projects. Some openly formulate the thesis that public sector projects are different from other projects (e.g., Tabish & Jha, 2011), others explicitly or implicitly state that the results of their research are valid only for public projects (e.g., Faridian, 2015; Adler et al., 2016).

- **The Averaging Stream**

Researchers who report that both public and private projects have been studied and then formulate conclusions regarding the entire population of projects (e.g., Martinsuo et al., 2006; Mengel et al., 2009). It can be concluded that these researchers believe that there are differences between public and private projects, but the inclusion of representatives of both these groups in the studied sample results in averaging the values, allowing for drawing valid conclusions for the entire population of projects.

- **The Stream of Differences Analysis**

These researchers deal with projects from different sectors trying to check whether there are any intersectoral differences. Some of these studies show

differences (e.g., Coster & Van Wijk, 2015; Hvidman & Andersen, 2014; Rwelamila & Purushottam, 2012) some do not, e.g., (Hobbs & Aubry, 2008; Ramos et al., 2016)

The existence of four different approaches to inter-sectoral differences shows that even on such a basic issue there is no consensus among project management researchers.

## Public sector projectification

The phenomenon of achieving an organization's goals by implementing projects, or projectification, was identified and introduced to the literature by Midler (1995). There is a bit of research on the projectification of public administration and the public sector as a whole (e.g. Schoper et al., 2018; Jałocha, 2019; Godenhjelm et al., 2019; Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014), indicating the growing importance of this phenomenon. Estimates of the size of public sector projectification are emerging. Schoper and her colleagues estimate that it ranges from 14.2% in Norway to 33.3% in Iceland. Ou et al. (2018) for China estimate public sector projectification at 34%, while Radujkovic & Misic (2019) estimate projectification of the Croatian public sector at 37%. Thus, **projectification, so understood, covers about 30% of public sector activity.**

But the phenomenon of projectification reported in the literature does not cover the entirety of projects in the public sector. Schoper and her colleagues explicitly state that their research did not include internal projects, i.e., those not directly aimed at achieving business goals.

To grasp the full significance of projectification for the public sector, it is necessary to distinguish between its two types: internal (instrumental, tool) and business (external). **Internal projectification** is the use of projects to modify an organization's processes - including or primarily taking the form of continuous operations. An example of internal projectification could be the implementation of a project to modify the permitting process for any activity. Since the organization does not become more project-based as a result of such an activity, projects of this kind are excluded from existing projectification studies. **Business projectification** is the implementation of projects as ways for an organization to achieve value (for example, building houses or organizing cultural events). Midler, in fact, was only concerned with business projectification.

The public sector performs many of its functions through the continuous provision of routine activities (e.g., education, health care, issuance of all sorts of permits, welfare functions, police functions, etc.), the improvement of which depends on the implementation of changes. These changes are implemented through projects, i.e. internal projectification is an important phenomenon occurring in public organizations. This component of internal projectification that is responsible for implementing business projectification processes is called **meta-projectification**.

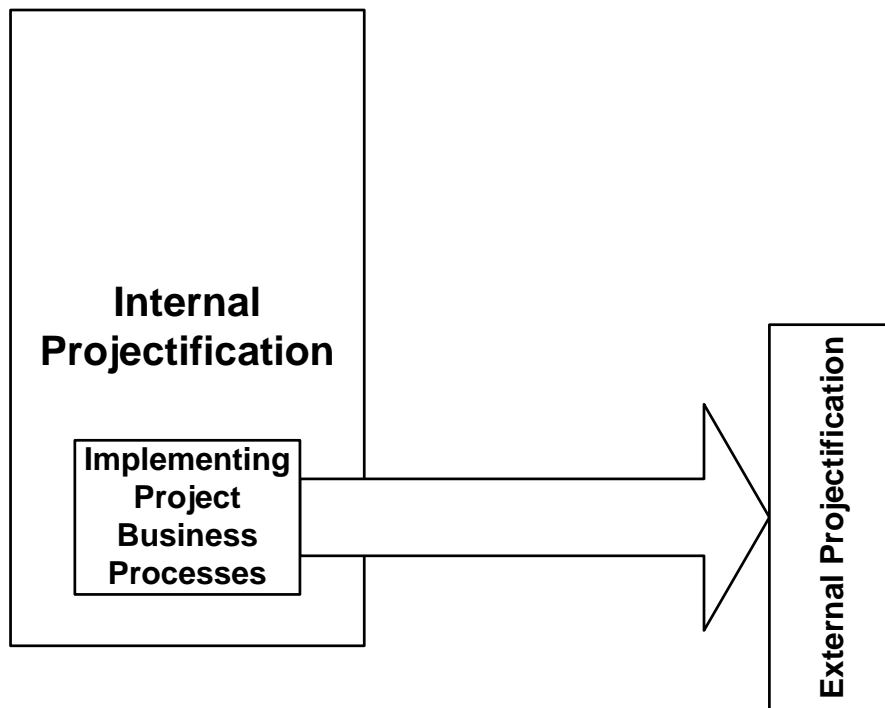


Figure 3. Internal and external projectification

More precisely, according to Figure 2, internal projectification in the public sector is the implementation of a certain public policy. Such policy can apply to the sector as a whole, as well as to individual organizations. A manifestation of **public sector projectification is the setup of the Governmental Project Implementation System**, to be more precise: its entering at least the Governmental Level in the Governmental Project Management Maturity Model (Gasik, 2023), in which the government begins to deal with project implementation in the public sector.

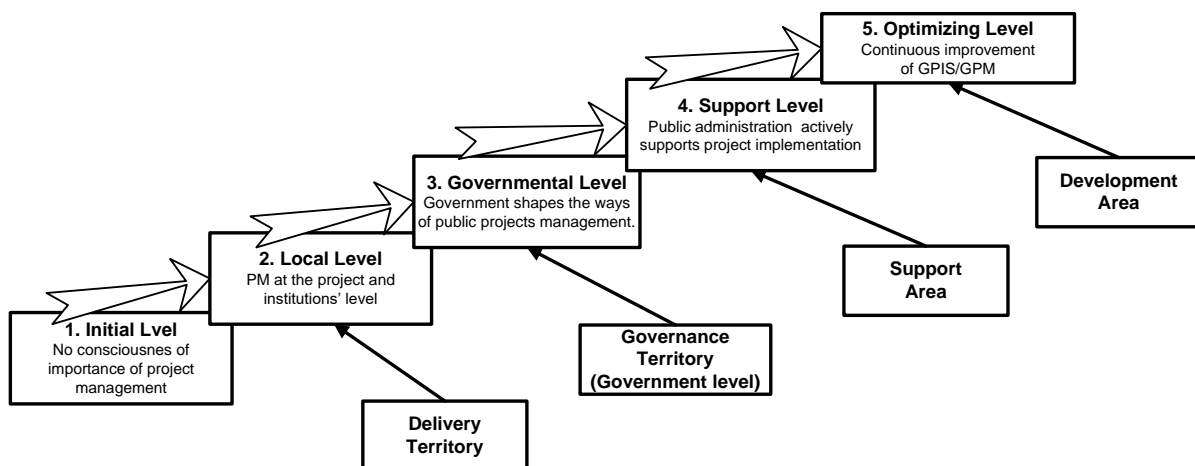


Figure 4. Governmental Project Management Maturity Model (source: Gasik, 2023)

So, the actual importance of projects for the public sector is much greater than the previously cited figures and analyses performed by researchers working in the PM area. **Current models and theories do not fully describe public sector projectification.**

## Comparison of research papers

Slavinski et al. (2023) analyze articles published in IJPM over the past 40 years. In their analysis of articles published in the last 40 years, **the term government or public administration does not appear at all as a separate research theme**. Public-private partnership does not appear as a separate theme, but as a component of the partnership theme. This shows little interest in specific issues of public sector projects in this leading PM journal.

We did a more detailed, quantitative analysis of the relationship between PA and PM research by looking at articles published in 2023 in renowned journals in these areas. On the PA side, we chose volume 25 of **Public Management Review** (PMR). At that time, 101 articles were published there. On the PM side, We also chose volume 41 of **International Journal of Project Management** (IJPM; 67 papers).

### Journals mutual references

We analyzed cross-references from articles published in the International Journal of Project Management and the Project Management Review. On the IJPM side, references to PMR appear in 8 (out of 67) articles. PMR, on the other hand, refers to IJPM in 7 (out of 101) articles. Additionally, PMR includes 3 references to the second leading PM journal: Project Management Journal (of which 2 among articles also citing IJPM). This means that a total of 8 articles in PMR referred to leading journal devoted to project management.

There is little mutual interest in scientific work between these journals.

The second question of mutual interest among researchers concerns project analyzes on the PA side and analyzes of issues related to public administration on the PM side.

From the point of view of public administration, **the fundamental issue is linking projects with public policies** (each public project implements a certain public policy). One article is devoted to this issue in IJPM (Söderberg & Liff, (2023)). Two articles (Zhang & Leiringer, 2023) and (Benitez-Avila & Hartmann 2023) deal with sector connections, i.e. public-private partnership, as the main topic. Also Machiels et al. (2023) deal with public megaprojects. Fortin & Söderlund (2023) deal with innovation in public projects. Nguyen et al. (2023) deal with project stakeholders and point out the differences between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. Floricel et. al. (2023) deal with public projects, formulate conclusions for projects of all sectors (i.e. they represent The Denying Differences Stream described above). Cornelio et al. (2023) and Jiang et al. (2023) analyze megaprojects, which are most often public.

On the PMR side, two articles (Kundu et al., 2023; Santos & Laureano, 2023) actually deal with projects. But the third article in terms of the number of occurrences of the word "project" (FitzGerald et al., 2023) requires a comment. The authors analyze "social impact bonds (SIBs) projects". These include, among others: "projects" regarding the continuous provision of services, e.g. in the field of "family welfare", homelessness, well-being. Like projects "arranging online peer support sessions, social media groups and newsletters as well as social activities such as virtual bingo and yoga sessions." Other projects "support users' mental health, supply basic needs, support users in the access and use of digital communication tools, offer welfare



advice, and provide general guidance around Covid-19." This is not consistent with the understanding of the term "project" in the PM community.

At the same time, in as many as 32 PMR paper, projects are mentioned as a way of working when creating an article, a way of obtaining data, or a way of obtaining financing. This confirms the fact that there are indeed projects implemented on the PA side (although it is not clear whether they are understood in the same way as on the PM side), but the scientific interest in them is low and does not reflect the real role of projects on that side.

### **What are the programs for both sides**

One definition of public administration says that it is "management of public programs" (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2009). Since program is also one of the basic concepts on the PM side, it is worth analyzing the understanding of this concept on both sides. The word "program" appears in 77 out of 101 PMR articles, which shows its importance for research on public administration. This is a larger number than articles containing the word "project" (67 occurrences). What does this concept mean as understood by PA researchers?

Halling et al. (2023) analyze programs such as Medicaid (social security program) and SNAP, which provides food to people in need. Turner (2023) deals with, among others, the program of permanent psychological support. Kim (2023) deals with an ethics program that involves supporting ethical behavior of employees. Barraket et al. (2023) analyze a support program for refugees and people seeking asylum. Sullivan et al. (2023) analyze the Continuum of Care (CoC) Program, a nationwide local homeless service provider. This program does not consist of projects either. Conteh & Harding (2023) analyze the ISI program "consisting of the federal government consulting with its provincial counterparts and entering into partnership agreements with the private sector". Consulting is not a project. Projects are probably the conclusion of an agreement - i.e. we are dealing here with a mixed program consisting of both processes and projects.

### **The understanding of programs that they do not consist only of projects is dominant in PMR articles from the 2023 volume.**

However, on the PM side, the dominant, and in fact the only, understanding of **program is a set of jointly managed projects to achieve a common goal** defined almost 20 years ago by PMI (2006) and continuing to this day.

This means that researchers from the PA and PM communities do not have a common understanding of even such a basic concept as a program.

## **Summary**

The understanding of and cooperation between the research communities of public administration and project management are definitely insufficient.

Project management in the public sector is a very important issue covering internal and external projectification. Public sector projectification is a public policy that can be defined for the entire sector or for individual public organizations. It is necessary to establish a common conceptual base, in particular to jointly define the concept of a

program. Project management is a tool for public administration, these are not equivalent areas of activity. Therefore, concepts from the area of project management should be adapted to concepts from the area of public administration, in particular when it comes to programs. Perhaps the discrepancy in concepts on both sides results in the inability of researchers from both areas to work together, which is starting to look like silos.

For the synchronization of research works, the creation of a scientific journal devoted to such an important issue as public project management could be of great importance.

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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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