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Advanced project support
Let's talk about public projects
by Stanisław Gasik, PhD

Let's talk about public projects[1]

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Introduction

Every action taken by public administration related to projects in which they are involved aims to increase the likelihood of project success. This includes defining and implementing methodologies, establishing governance principles, creating PMOs, supervising implementation, encouraging knowledge exchange, and various other activities. These are ways in which government institutions support public projects. But **project support** is often considered to be activities that directly involve public institutions in the implementation of the project (**direct support**). We can divide this type of support into two categories.

The simplest and most commonly implemented way for public institutions (e.g., Project Management Offices) to support public projects is by performing routine tasks such as financial management (e.g., recording financial documents) and communication management (e.g., preparing periodic reports, supporting and documenting meetings). This is a **routine project support**. In this article, we will focus on more advanced functions of public project support.

Projects, by their very nature, encounter risks and problems during implementation. Some of these problems can and should be resolved by the contractor teams themselves. This category includes, for instance, some issues related to project planning, the low performance of the contractor's project team members, or the quality of the software being developed. They are internal problems of the contractor.

However, there are also problems that the contractor team cannot prevent or that the public institution can solve more effectively. In public infrastructure projects, one issue might be the lengthy process of obtaining necessary permits or environmental approvals. Another example of a problem in public projects could be the prolonged decision-making process on the side of the contracting institution's management.

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[1] Editor's note: This article is the latest 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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When a project requires cooperation among several public institutions, a lack of collaboration and coordination can be problematic. It also happens that the public employees assigned to participate in the project do not have the appropriate competencies or qualifications for the project's execution. Another issue could be the lack of financial liquidity on the part of the public entity. Overcoming negative attitudes of public stakeholders, such as local communities, often cannot be achieved without the involvement of the public institution. For instance, how to organize the relocation of communities from areas where infrastructure projects will be carried out? These are just examples of issues that the public institution can handle better than the contractor.

If the resolution of such problems were left to the contractor, they could at best appeal to the appropriate public institutions to take the necessary actions in a timely manner. However, this approach is rarely effective. It may also be the case that the contractor cannot effectively solve its internal problems, for instance, those related to quantitative risk management. An alternative approach is the active involvement of public institutions in ensuring the success of public projects. Actions taken by public institutions aimed at solving problems that are better managed by the public sector rather than by a private contractor are called **advanced project support**.

There are two main types of advanced project support: **problem-oriented support** and **process-oriented support** (Gasik, 2023).

Problem-oriented support

Problem-oriented support, sometimes called **ex-post support**, involves resolving issues that hinder the project's progress after they have arisen. Several governments have institutionalized this type of project support.

Below I describe some examples of institutions created to implement problem-oriented support.

In India, the Project Monitoring Group (PMG) operates at the federal level. Projects (whether private or public) seeking support from PMG first register on the Cabinet Committee on Investment (CCI) electronic support platform. Private entrepreneurs submit their projects through the sponsoring ministry or the ministry executing the project. CCI reviews the application, and its opinion is sent to PMG, which decides on registration. Projects recommended for rejection by CCI are also forwarded to PMG. Registration allows projects to report issues to PMG, which the government of India will help resolve. PMG assists in addressing problems that should be resolved by the Cabinet Secretariat and CCI (India CSID, 2014). It collaborates with ministries, states, and investors via e-CCI. PMG acts as a single point of contact for project teams with public institutions, helping to expedite projects that have stalled. PMG does not resolve the problems directly but refers them to the appropriate ministries and monitors the resolution process, including meetings between CCI staff, ministries, and project representatives.

In the American state of Maryland, project support is one of the functions of the Oversight Manager (OM). The OM serves as the single point of contact for the project manager in resolving project issues. For example, when a contract issue arises, the

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project manager turns to the OM, who then finds the appropriate person to resolve the problem (Ross, 2014).

In Malaysia, the National Action Council (NAC) is responsible for identifying and overcoming constraints in development projects (Malaysia Dahlan, 2015). PMOs also perform project recovery functions, which involve direct interventions to solve problems (Vermont AoDS, n.d.).

The UK's Infrastructure and Projects Authority (IPA) provides various types of support for at-risk projects. Following an assurance review, issues may be identified that the IPA can better address. The IPA can provide a commercial adviser, project delivery adviser, or project finance adviser to work with the project team to resolve the issues (UK IPA, 2020).

When a project encounters a problem, the US Federal Highway Administration can provide technical assistance, funding support, and regulatory flexibility to help resolve issues and expedite project completion (US DoT, n.d.).

Process-Oriented Support

Process-oriented support is sometimes called **project facilitation** or **ex-ante support**. This type of support involves providing assistance throughout the entire project process or for a specific part of it — most often project initiation or planning — by a specialized entity. In this approach, a public institution typically assigns a supporting individual, sometimes referred to as a "patron."

The minimal version of project implementation support includes assistance in preparing the documents necessary to obtain the required permits (California DoGS, 2013). When an initiative is proposed in Alaska, a coordinator is assigned to help the applicant initiate the project, including obtaining such permits (Alaska OPMP, 2024).

In Australia, at the Commonwealth level, the Major Projects Facilitation Agency (MPFA) operates under the Department of Industry, Science, Energy, and Resources (Australia DISR, 2024). This agency provides services for projects undertaken by private companies, demonstrating the importance of non-governmental projects to the Australian government. Since public projects are those involving government participation in management, private projects thus become partially governmental. The significance of a project for Australia's development determines whether it is granted major project status (allowing it to utilize MPFA services). Each major project has a sponsor from Australia's central administration. MPFA, among others, offers services for obtaining the necessary government permits to start and carry out the project.

In Western Australia, the preparation of major state initiatives can be facilitated by a staff member from a specialized unit. Their role is to support the creation process of the main Project Definition Document (PDD). The level of involvement depends on the project's importance. There are three levels of support:

Level One is for projects that can be implemented within the existing environment. Support involves initial consultations and presenting the project to the appropriate institutions.

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Level Two, the most commonly used, supports projects of significant or strategic importance. A project manager is assigned to help the applicant with government-related aspects of defining the PDD (e.g., location issues, regional matters, coordination, and interaction with government agencies). The applicant receives detailed information on the status of project approval.

Level Three is for specific, complex projects of strategic importance to the state and government. In this case, a senior project manager is assigned, who, in addition to providing Level Two support, assists with coordinating government approvals and negotiating government contracts (Western Australia Government, 2021).

In North Carolina, a higher-level institution can support projects when they face significant issues. Advisors are assigned to projects as needed, with their primary role being to review and oversee project management. Advisors may assess the capabilities of project managers, recommend decisions to the state IT director regarding the project's progression, check if the agency is prepared for the next project stages, identify risks, recommend corrective actions and escalate them if necessary, mentor the project manager, provide essential data for project plans, and review bid documentation (North Carolina OSCIO, 2013).

An interesting solution has been implemented at the federal level in Canada. The Major Project Management Office (MPMO) handles natural resource projects. The MPMO works to ensure that federal regulatory reviews are conducted in a timely, coordinated, and efficient manner. The office acts as a central coordinating body, bringing together various federal departments and agencies involved in the review and approval of major projects. The MPMO facilitates communication and consultation with stakeholders, including Indigenous communities, industry proponents, environmental groups, and the public. In this way, the MPMO takes on many tasks, whose inefficient execution could delay or prevent project completion.

A similar role is played by the US Permitting Council, established under the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (FAST-41), which aims to "develop and implement comprehensive permitting timetables" (US Government, 2015).

It is also possible to appoint a "patron" for major projects, whose task is to represent the project in governmental and other forums (Victoria MPV, 2013). In the American state of Alaska, project initiatives are assigned a coordinator who helps initiate the project, particularly in obtaining necessary approvals (Alaska OPMP, 2024). In the Australian state of New South Wales, within the Planning, Industry & Environment department, there is the role of Project Support Officer. Their tasks include "supporting the development and delivery of projects in line with established project plans and objectives" (NSW Government, 2020).

Summary

Public projects are typically managed by private entities. However, this does not mean that public institutions can limit their role to selecting a contractor, signing a contract, supervising compliance of work with applicable procedures, and accepting the final product. The public institution that signs a contract with the contractor is always accountable to the citizens for the project's success. Therefore, public institutions

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should do everything possible (and legally permissible) to ensure that taxpayer-funded projects succeed.

Every private company undertaking public projects should have the appropriate capabilities in this field, including the necessary knowledge and familiarity with applicable procedures. However, these capabilities might not be sufficient for efficiently executing projects, overcoming particularly complex problems, and preventing significant, non-standard risks. To manage these issues effectively, it is beneficial for the government to be well-prepared and capable of offering (advanced) support for the projects it oversees.

To address this need, some governments create mechanisms for advanced project support. There are two types of such support: problem-oriented support and preventive support. Establishing such institutions significantly increases the chances of public projects succeeding.

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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.

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.

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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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