Let's talk about public projects[1]

Did the project help achieve policy objectives? Evaluation of public projects[2]

Stanisław Gasik, PhD

Introduction

The primary goal of evaluation is to assess the relationship between the project, its success, and its implementation.

Evaluation can be conducted at any stage of a public project—from the initial business case, through ongoing assessments of implementation, to a final post-project review. The main objective of evaluations conducted before a project's completion is to determine whether it has a realistic chance of success. In this article, we focus on **post-project evaluation**, which seeks to answer the question: *Was the project successful?*

In this article, we will focus on post-project evaluation in well-organized, developed countries with so-called "positive public administrations," i.e., those whose goal is to improve the well-being of society (e.g., Duncan, 2024).

The concept of success is essential to conducting a meaningful project evaluation. Success can be defined in several ways. Turner et al. (2010) identify three levels of project success:

1. **Management success** – delivering the project on time and within budget;
2. **Product success** – the usability or effectiveness of the project's output;
3. **Business success** – delivering value.

According to the Project Management Association of Japan (PMAJ, 2005), as adopted by the Project Management Institute (PMI, 2024), a project is successful if it effectively

[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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delivers value to its stakeholders. In the public sector, this definition requires further analysis.

Success and structure of projects, programs and public policies

Success and the Structure of Projects, Programs, and Public Policies

While profit is the primary success criterion in private sector projects, in public sector projects, success is measured by the creation of **public value** (Moore, 1994)—that is, outcomes that are important, valued, and socially desirable. For public administration projects, their success cannot be evaluated without reference to the public policies they are intended to implement (e.g., McConnell, 2010).

Some public policies are implemented through a **single project**. For example, the policy of shortening maritime transport between the East and West Coasts of the United States was realized through the construction of the Panama Canal. Similarly, the policy of providing drinking water to several western U.S. states was implemented through the construction of the Hoover Dam on the Colorado River. These types of policies and programs are referred to as **mono-programs**. In such cases, evaluating the success of the policy is effectively the same as evaluating the success of the project.

However, more commonly, public policies are implemented through **public programs** consisting of multiple projects. These programs may also include ongoing processes or operations, collectively referred to as **program components**.

Consider the following examples of extensive public policies and programs:

- **Major sporting events**, such as the FIFA World Cup, cannot be fully evaluated for success until the final tournament is held. However, many projects—such as constructing or upgrading stadiums and public infrastructure—must be completed in advance.
- In the **Apollo Program**, whose ultimate goal was to land a man on the Moon, success was marked by the missions of Apollo 11 and subsequent flights (and, notably, the failure of Apollo 13). However, those missions depended on earlier projects to develop the infrastructure necessary for spaceflight.
- A policy to **improve rail transport**—in terms of speed, punctuality, capacity, etc.—is implemented through numerous individual projects that build or upgrade rail segments. Each project may be evaluated separately based on how it improves transport in that section, even as part of a broader program.
- **Road safety policies and programs** may include infrastructure projects (building or improving roads), increased surveillance, and public awareness campaigns. The desired outcome—such as reducing accidents or fatalities—is shaped by all components. So, how should a road improvement project be evaluated if accident rates remain unchanged?

- In a **policy to promote historical awareness**, a program might include building a museum followed by organizing exhibitions. Can the museum project be deemed successful if there is little public interest in the exhibitions?
- Consider a **hypothetical project** to build a branch of the European Parliament in Budapest, as part of a policy to strengthen European integration. If Hungary deepens its EU ties, the policy—and the project—might be seen as a success. But if Hungary were to leave the EU (a "Hunexit"), the same project could be judged a failure, regardless of the building's quality or whether it was completed on time. According to PMI's (2024) public value criterion, in the first scenario the project would have generated public value; in the second, it would likely be seen as a waste of public funds (Hungarian or European).
- In Berlin, the **Palace of the Republic** was demolished not because of structural issues, but due to its symbolic association with the former GDR regime. Before German reunification, it was a symbol of pride in East Germany; afterward, it became a controversial relic of a divided past. This example illustrates the **relativity** of public project evaluation—what is considered successful in one context may be reassessed in another.

These examples highlight the **complexity** involved in evaluating public projects. Success is not only multidimensional but also context-dependent, especially when linked to long-term policy goals and shifting political or societal values.

How to evaluate projects in public policies?

The examples above illustrate several challenges in evaluating public projects:

1. The value of a public project is closely tied to the evaluation of the public policy it supports.
2. The evaluation of one project may depend on the performance of other components within the same policy, including both other projects and ongoing operations.
3. The perceived value of public policies—and their components—can change over time, influenced by shifts in political leadership or societal preferences.
4. Some public projects can be evaluated independently, particularly when they are the only components of a mono-program or when they address a clearly defined element of a policy objective.
5. The beneficiaries of public policies and their projects are society as a whole or specific communities, either directly or indirectly.

The concept of business success refers primarily to the effectiveness of the public policy and the program in delivering value.

However, the performance of the **project team**, especially the management team, also requires evaluation. This should occur **after the team's work concludes**, and not only after the full implementation of the policy. In some cases, direct value can be

assessed immediately. For instance, in a project to organize a mass event, the number of attendees may serve as a clear success indicator.

In contrast, many public policies and projects require **longer-term observation** to determine whether they have delivered the intended value. For example, in an IT system implementation project at a public institution, evaluation should consider whether the system has actually improved service delivery and reduced processing times for users.

Therefore, it is often **not possible to evaluate the full value delivered immediately** after project completion. At the time of completion, the focus should be on whether the **project outputs** were delivered according to specifications, within the agreed timeframe and budget—that is, on achieving **management success** (Turner et al., 2010).

Project completion is also the right moment to assess whether **best practices** were followed and to document lessons for the future. These insights—called **lessons learned** (e.g., Gasik, 2011, 2023)—identify both successful practices and practices to avoid in upcoming projects.

From the perspective of a project's **role in achieving public policy success**, we can distinguish three categories of projects:

- **Independent final projects**, which directly deliver the policy's ultimate value (mono-programs fit here).
- **Parallel final projects**, which deliver value **alongside** other components.
- **Auxiliary projects**, which create the **necessary conditions** for other components to deliver value.

For example:

- In a **World Championship program**, organizing the tournament itself is an **independent final project**.
- In the **Apollo Program**, the manned Moon landings were **parallel final projects**. (Note: "parallel" here refers to functional role, not timing.) In a **road safety program**, parallel final components may include infrastructure upgrades, stricter traffic enforcement, and media campaigns.
- **Auxiliary projects** in the Apollo Program included building the infrastructure for launching spacecraft. Similarly, under a history popularization policy, the construction of a museum would be considered an auxiliary project supporting later activities such as exhibitions.

Managerial Evaluation

Projects in all three categories—independent final, parallel final, and auxiliary—are subject to **managerial evaluation**.

The purpose of managerial evaluation is to assess whether the project delivered the planned outputs on time and within the allocated budget. Beyond that, it examines

how well the **management processes** functioned, with the goal of extracting lessons that can improve future project performance (von Zedtwitz, 2002; Koners & Goffin, 2005). A key part of this process is **reflective analysis**—an honest assessment of what went right, what went wrong, and why (Julian, 2008). These reflections, commonly referred to as **lessons learned**, can be documented in organizational knowledge repositories or retained informally within the project team.

Success Evaluation

A public project is considered **successful** when it effectively delivers the expected **public value**. However, this value is defined in the context of the **public policy** the project supports. Thus, project success cannot be evaluated in isolation from the policy it aims to implement.

Standalone success evaluations are possible primarily for:

- **Independent final projects**, such as those in mono-programs, and
- **Parallel final projects**, where the intended outcomes are clearly defined within the policy (e.g., increasing rail transport speed on a specific railway section).

In contrast, for **auxiliary projects** and many **parallel final projects**, it is typically **not possible** to assess success based on value delivery alone. In these cases, success is judged at the **policy or program level**, and the project itself can only be evaluated in terms of its **management performance**.

Public policies often pursue **multiple goals**. For instance, an industrial development policy in a particular region might aim to increase production, create jobs, and improve educational outcomes. As a result, both policies and their associated projects can be evaluated using different—and sometimes competing—criteria. This illustrates the greater **complexity of evaluating public projects** compared to private sector projects, where the main benchmark is usually profit or shareholder value.

Evaluation Based on Public Criteria

In addition to assessing management quality and delivered value, public projects must meet **specific criteria unique to the public sector** (Gasik, 2024). These include:

- **Legal compliance** – Projects must follow applicable laws and regulations, which can be complex and restrictive.
- **Impartiality** – Decisions must be free of bias or favoritism.
- **Transparency** – Project processes should be open and clear to the public, ensuring stakeholders are regularly informed.
- **Integrity** – Projects must be conducted honestly, with no tolerance for corruption.
- **Fairness** – Access to project outcomes should be equitable, especially when public goods or services are involved.

- **Ethics** – Ethical conduct is a fundamental requirement in all phases of public project implementation.

These principles serve as essential criteria for evaluating public projects and are particularly important given their societal impact and accountability requirements.

Summary

Public projects are components of broader **public programs**, which in turn serve to implement **public policies**. Only in specific cases can the **ultimate value** of a public project be evaluated independently of its program or policy context.

In most cases, the value delivered by a project depends on whether the **policy itself succeeds**. A public project may yield different evaluation results depending on which policy goals are being assessed.

Every public project, however, can and should be evaluated based on three core dimensions:

1. **Management performance** – Delivery of scope, schedule, and budget;
2. **Value contribution** – Where measurable, how effectively the project advanced policy goals;
3. **Public-sector criteria** – Compliance with standards such as legality, transparency, fairness, and ethics.

These multiple layers of evaluation reflect the **unique demands and responsibilities** inherent in public project management.

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About the Author

Stanisław Gasik, PhD, PMP

Warsaw, Poland

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.

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.

Stanisław is an Honorary Industry Advisor for PM World Journal and Library.

His web page is www.gpm3.eu.