

## THE PROJECTIFICATION OF NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS: INSIGHTS FROM (AND FOR) MULTI-PROJECT MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this paper is to indicate what insights could be gained from investigating the interplay between the latest research in multi-project management and the specifics of nonprofit organizations management - in terms of the primacy of mission formulation, board governance and donor priority. The paper approaches projectification of nonprofit organizations from a diachronic perspective - exposing the organizational design and governance from the incorporation of nonprofit organization to the projectification phase, and links the enactment of the nonprofit mission to the processes of leading strategies through projects, integration mechanisms and human resources allocation. As results of this research the paper proposes the enrichment of nonprofit boards with project managers and the emergence of a multi-dimensional model for assessing the roles of project teams and teams members in nonprofit organizations operating in multi project settings under the restriction of nonprofit management specifics.*

**KEYWORDS:** *nonprofit organizations, project management, multi-project practices*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the past decades, a lot of research has been done both on nonprofit organizations and on multi-project management. But there has not been much effort committed to studying how the specific intricacies of nonprofit behavior are to be connected to the issues unfolded by multi-project practices. In order to settle a frame for discussing this topic and for refining the aim of this paper, we shall proceed with defining a nonprofit entity and its characteristics as a social institution, moving on to looking at the current processes of organizational projectification and programmification as portrayed by the relevant literature. The last section of the introduction would point to a more global conceptual framework for nonprofit management in multi-project contexts, a framework for which this paper will only try to elucidate a number of elements in the post-introductory sections.

When it comes to defining a nonprofit organization (NP) – the term is rather self-describing, meaning that a NP is an organization characterized by a restriction of non-distribution of profits (*via* dividends or through other means – such as managerial wages) (Anheier & Salamon, 2006). Of course, this definition is broad enough to capture different organizational settings which could all be gathered under the NP umbrella, encompassing the various adjacent concepts of the charitable/voluntary sector, non-governmental organizations and civil society organisms (Anheier & Salomon, 2006).

The social appearance of these institutions is aptly described by an economic model which takes into account the social needs that cannot be satisfied as a result of institutional failures. Steinberg (2006) provides a model of three failures, positing NPs as an institutional solution to market failures and governmental difficulties, a context in which NPs could also witness their own failures, but in

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different respects (and for different reasons) than their market/government counterparts. Microeconomic modeling of a NP agency also tackles questions that are very specific to NPs, questions such as: What do NPs, as economic agents, optimize? How do competition and cooperation explain NP's strategy and action?

Just to get a glimpse of how this kind of questions are answered, we mention that, according to Hughes & Luksetich (2010), NPs might be optimizing objectives ranging from maximization of output to maximization of profit (being in the latter case an economic profit-maximizing entity in disguise). The second types of questions are answered using tools such as continuous grids of collaboration and assessments of the advantages provided by collaboration (Irvin, 2010)

The specifics of NP management are given either by their NP status or their stakeholders; we could categorize these characteristics as follows (various authors emphasize one or many of these traits - Anheier, 2005; Drucker, 2005):

- The primacy of the mission formulation (from their incorporation throughout their whole organizational life);
- The preeminence of donors among the stakeholders and of their perception on mission compliance (this could be seen as an emphasize on a category of organizational stakeholders);
- The preeminence of boards as governing bodies;
- The availability of volunteer work (leading to the associated issues of volunteering work appraisal);
- The measurement of organizational success (since profit or market related indicators are inadequate tools for measuring organizational results).

Midler's (1995) seminal article introduced the notion of projectification, exposing variegated organizational, structural and career transformations occurring in organizations that are switching from the logic of functional work-charts and stable systems to the logic of temporariness, flux and decentralization of hierarchical formal authority. Project themselves could be seen as temporary organizations (Turner & Muller, 2003), but projectification could go even further, as a social process, and become an aspect of human condition (Jensen et al., 2016). From a strictly organizational design vantage, NPs exhibit, in some stages of their organizational development, temporary structures akin to project teams, the issue is still how useful (if unavoidable) is the projectification of NPs?

Projects might be just an additional and contingent feature of some organizations, while others supply all their outputs by means of networks of (somehow) related projects. Multi-projects organizations have provided the context for the appearance of project based-organizations, portfolios and programs which cannot be explained in terms of a flat aggregation of projects. We witness hence a transition in these contexts from projectification to programmification (Maylor et al., 2006). Hereafter we shall use projectification and programmification interchangeably as referring to processes of organizational transition and current work in multi-project contexts.

Applying (and interpreting the relevance of) the results of multi-project managerial research is part of a bigger search for an appropriate conceptual framework for the management of NPs in multi-project contexts. The quest for a conceptual framework is grounded in a variety of disciplines, having as pillars: social theories regarding nonprofit institutions, stakeholder theory, and multi-project management studies. The assessment of NPs management, *via* deliverables and outputs, would require investigating the suitable quality management procedures and a set of performance indicators that would be relevant for this type of entities. These elements are illustrated in Figure 1. This paper aims at investigating the answers to the following questions:

*What could be the interplay between the latest research in multi-project management and the specifics of NP management?*

*Which insights could be gained from the interplay between the latest research in multi-project management and the specifics of NP management?*

The method of research shall consist in identifying some of the latest insights from multi-project literature and assessing how these are qualified by the specifics of the NP management. Due to the space allowed, we shall mainly consider the managerial specifics of NP regarding the primacy of mission, the role of donor's perception and the preeminence of boards, while also looking at the impact that multi-project solutions would have on human resources practices.



**Figure 1. Elements of a conceptual framework for nonprofit management in multiple contexts**

*Source: the author*

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE EPISTEMIC BACKGROUND OF MULTI-PROJECT RESEARCH

Since the relevant literature would be reviewed throughout the entire paper, this section would deal mainly with the epistemic approach of multi-project studies. The specific challenges and solutions will be discussed in section 3.

Analyzing NPs from a managerial point of view has led to a number of topics that are mainly concerning one of the following areas: preeminence of boards (in terms of roles, leadership and innovation), the mission as the main promoter of strategic vision casting process, the role of donors and financers (as an extension an application of stakeholder theory). But projectification of NP is mainly seen as a transitive stage in organizational development as the NP exhibits some project management structures (and metrics). (Anheier, 2005; Drucker, 2005; Phills, 2005).

On the side of project management literature we encounter a shift from project management depicted as a linear endeavor linked with mechanic procedure to project management being analyzed through the lenses of pragmatic linguistics practices, foucauldian social analysis, dynamic capabilities or human conditions paradigms (Jensen, 2016; Killen & Hunt, 2010). Smirad et al. (2018) consider that the theory of project based organizations has to expose three main problems: the absence of the informal in understanding governance and organizational design, the lack of integration of temporalities and the confusion between governance and organizational design. While emphasizing the fluidity and constant propensity to structural change (leading altogether to an obsolescence of the category of structure) provides a more realistic approach, there is still a vital

need in organizations for patterning social relation along visible materialities (Clegg et al., 2018). Various concepts have been proposed to balance change and temporality with stability and formalism, concepts such as: ambidextrous organizations and edge of chaos in multi-project companies. On the extremes delineated by the interval chaos-structure, we encounter, according to Geraldi (2008) the phenomena of bureaucratization of chaos, on one extreme, and the chaotification of order, on the other extreme - respectively. According to their fitness for creativity and change the various project units should be able to coexist in the same organizational context, in order to provide the appropriate balance between an internal need for stability and an external demand for change.

In terms of governance in the instance of project management studies we also encounter a theoretical transition from focusing on strategy and governance to the processes of strategizing and governmentality as disperse practices of governing (Lowenstedt et al., 2018; Simrad et al., 2018). While concentrating on practices seems an appeal to common sense, the whole concept of practice requires a theoretical envelope grounded in a postmodern linguistic turn in social sciences (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). Even if this approach has its merits, it presents, in our view, at least two epistemological limits: formalism (and permanency) are a hallmark of science (movement itself is actually described in equations of movement which *do not change as descriptors*) and, secondly, in the nature of the case, modeling (although based on practices) still deals with a vision of a construed and fictitious organizational setting mediating our understanding of the objective realm. Speaking about *narratives*, in social science, signals somehow that we are not dealing with universal (ising) models, but if that is actually the case, then the pretention of scientific generalization vanishes.

These overarching topics and trends in project management are pointing to the necessity to intertwine the managerial specifics of NP as social institutions into the various levels of multi-project management structural transformations. We shall focus hereafter on the relationships between three of the NP specifics (the relevance of the mission formulation, the governing role of the Board and the presence of donors as preeminent stakeholders) and the main organizational transformations required by multi-project contexts (the interplay between project and strategy, mechanisms of project integration, human resources allocation)

### **3. STAGES OF NP'S ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN AND MULTI-PROJECT MANAGERIAL INTEGRATION - CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS**

This main section of the paper will look at the projectification of NPs from a diachronic perspective (exposing the organizational design and governance from incorporation to the projectification phase), and linking the enactment of the mission to the processes of leading strategies through projects, project integration mechanisms and human resources allocation. As it will be apparent throughout - the mission, the Board and the donors, would serve as the main conceptual specifics of NP that would either - qualify, restrict or nuance multi-project processes, challenges and solutions.

#### **3.1 Incorporation design and projectification**

As it happens with most of the organizations, NPs go through different organizational structures and principles of governance during their organizational life. When NPs get incorporated, they start in an embryonic form having a steering board - which has to enact upon the mission as stated by the founders in the articles of incorporation – and a small number of auxiliary staff having a functional role. The roles of the Board, form the embryonic phase and later on, are grouped usually under the following rubrics: monitoring, supporting, partnering and representing (Cumberland et al. 2015). As the organization grows, a tendency occurs to group operations, either per beneficiaries or per deliverables (categories of services) (Anheier, 2005). In the latter case, teams are assigned for a category of services rendered, and if these services would lack the dimension of mass delivery,

being rather unique outputs, the organizational structure is naturally getting projectified, either through incipient matrix organizational charts or boldly towards a project based organizations.

The mission statement serves, *inter alia*, at identifying and prioritizing the services (and hence the projects). Usually, since Drucker's (2005) emphasize the role of the mission as a cornerstone for the achieving NP's organizational goals, attention has been paid to aspects related to how mission statements should be formulated in NP in order to be effective in influencing NP's performance (Pandey et al., 2017).

According to the legal requirements, most NP would have a Board ensuring the mission compliance across projects; we suggest that at least some of the program managers could be part of the Board. These members of the Board, coming from amidst the project teams, will be facilitating the transition of strategic influences streamed by the input received from stakeholders throughout the projects implemented. If mission is formulated in ways that can be easily operationalized through project goals, the suggestion to include project managers in the Board team would not seem to be an intrusion of the middle management into a top management structure. As a representative organ, the Board, containing project managers, would also be able to handle more directly the needs of stakeholders and to assess the perception of donors upon the projects run by the NP. The Board already has the role of a buffer exercising a mediated "ownership" and a duty towards both founders and donors. In an interview with Drucker (2005), Hubbard noticed; "A board needs to know that it owns the organization. But it owns an organization not for its own sake - as a board - but for the sake of the mission which that organization is to perform. Board members don't own it as though they were stockholders voting blocks of stock; they own it because they care. I would say there's often a wrong understanding on the parts of boards of what that ownership means. They actually own it in partnership because, in a sense, the organization belongs just as much to others."

Introducing projects, as means of mission compliance in NPs, leads also to a number of issues related to multi-project management. Some of these issues are not necessarily linked with the structure of a multi-project organization, but rather, for the lack of a better term, they are linked to human nature as such. Among these issues we would rank: the division of team members perceiving themselves in terms of projects, rather than in organizational terms (along with the entire arsenal of ideological representation), the usage of misleading politicized language in promoting pet-projects etc. These "natural" problems are more salient and grievous in NPs where a great deal of emphasize is placed upon moral values and principles that might be specifically included in their mission statements (Phills, 2005). The tools used to deal with such occurrences could be inspired by the ones given by solutions to the principal-agent problems and through bargaining the degree of autonomy of various projects, in terms of governance and procedures. But even autonomy could be at times be perceived somewhere in between "positive freedom" versus a "negative lack of support" – depending on the other managerial instruments used to support the ongoing projects. (Vuorinen & Martinuso, 2018).

### **3.2 From strategy to project integration**

The standard, though often misleading, scenario usually portrays organizations as being a multi-level unfolding of structures that are the result of strategy and of the rules of governance. In their own turn, these basic guidelines (strategy & governance) provide a framework for project management (especially, according to our interest here - for the management of project management – Too & Waver, 2014). Now this scenario does not occur anywhere precisely in the fashion described above, that is why it is aptly named *utopian*. (Simrad et al., 2018) According to Simard et al. (2018) *utopia* is also present at the different levels of the organization, and not only at the outset of envisioning the organization as a whole.

The organization context supplies different metaphors used to portray the aptitude for fitness of various projects into a coherent whole that would embed meaning into current actions and build up a narrative (amidst which the mission serves as a cornerstone). Metaphors lack the representational

character of scientific models and might easily serve as instruments of organizational politics or - when it comes to their theoretical role – prove utterly unhelpful in a descriptive pursuit of multi-project life (Eskerod, 1996). The practices of organizations carry all over the organizational levels and components the common shared understanding of what the organization is aiming at as social entity.

In NPs the mission already embeds a certain view of what society is and what needs are more salient for the founding members of NPs and for their recurrent donors. This, presupposed, shared understanding does not obey the strict logic of top-down strategy alignment, but rather exhibits the two way track where projects activities also influence strategy casting (Clegg et al., 2018). This influence of project teams upon the strategy is defying the usual view of projects as mere sites of strategy implementation (Lowenstedt et al., 2018). In NPs, important donors could become committed to certain projects and the projects themselves would be regarded as market goods by donors (Valentinov, 2010). If this scenario occurs, *a fortiori*, a case for including projects managers in the NP Board could be made.

There are multiple ways to depict the structural relations occurring in a multi-project organization, one of these ways would be, to use the language of Vuorinen & Martinsuo (2018), to distinguish three interfaces: between parent organization and program, between projects within a program, within the projects themselves. This view could be closely linked with issues of project allocation, suggesting a threefold distinction of planning on long term, medium term and short term resource allocation - coupled with a Plan-Do-Check-Act at each time scale (Hendriks et al. 1999).

The problem of integration, defined hereafter as unity of effort between the three interfaces, would require addressing: mission coherency leaning on the perennial reason to be of a NP, procedural homogeneity, stakeholder sensitivity and reporting, transparent resource allocation. Of course, in order to add temporality to this seemingly static snapshot, the organization has to be endowed with rules of decision that would assess the need to recast any of the aforementioned sides of integration. Integration could overlap with the classic managerial function of coordination (Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2018), and could be seen as different from coordination in multi-project contexts only as matter of scale.

There are various ways to describe and achieve integration, like using a organizational maturity model, or indentifying the mechanism of integration divided across three categories – impersonal, personal and group mechanisms (Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2018). While the latter concepts are more abstract - they subsume current managerial practices, such as meetings, reports, procedures, information on the strategy - aimed at achieving integration objectives. In this respect, NPs might also use tools and approaches provided by maturity models and toolkits as those provided by the professional organizations in the field of project management.

### **3.3 Perspectives on the usage of human resources in NPs running multi-projects**

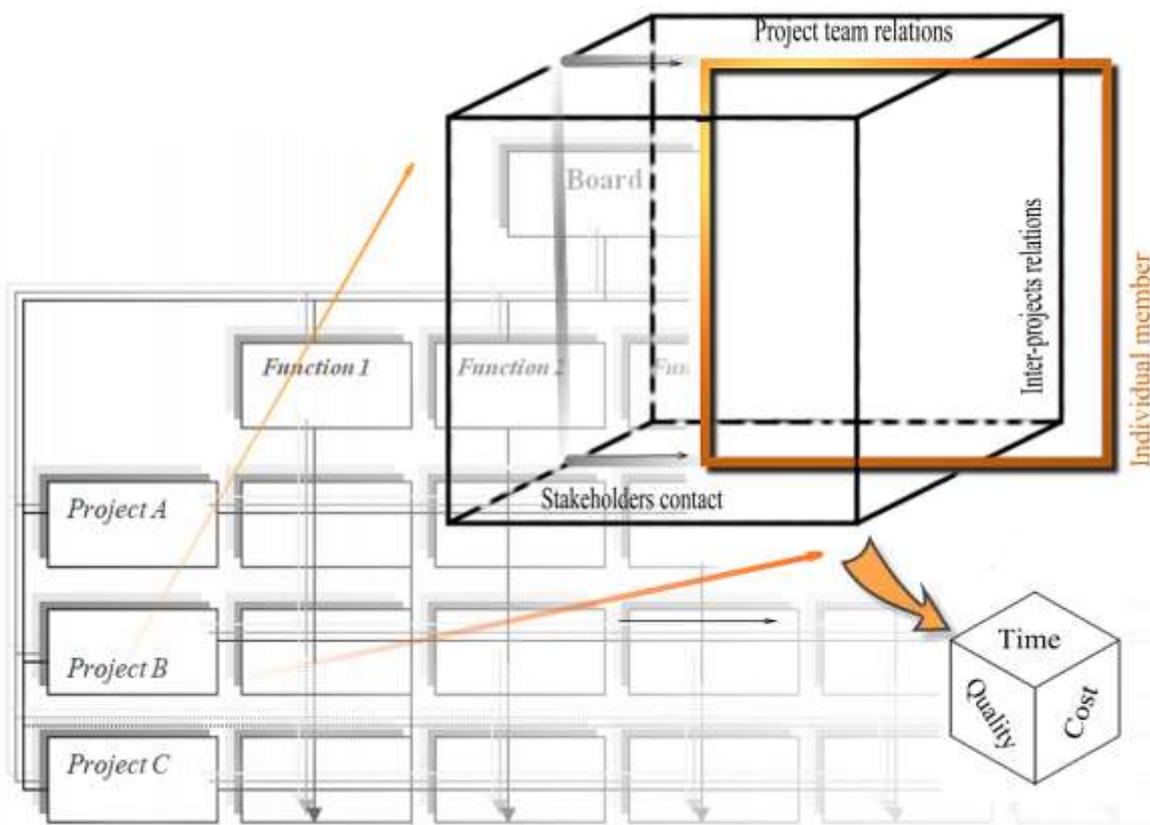
At the project level, we are dealing mainly with two categories of human resources: project managers and project team members. While looking at project managers as procedural experts might help in some instances (Van der Merwe, 1997), various organizational structures would be better served by a project management office (PMO). An ongoing examination of practices across organizational projects could provide a glimpse into how projects are actually run and which types of procedures are already enacted upon (Van der Merwe, 1997).

A NP endowed with a PMO could take heed of these current practices, while assessing them and deciding thereafter if those are to be generalized as best practices or improved/substituted by more efficient procedures.

Human resource allocation in multi-project environments might use as indicators the “project scatter factor” and “resource dedication profiles”. The latter pointing to the need of switching from project teams composed mainly of specialists to converting the career path of specialists into different roles, such as, service (functional) employees or internal experts (Hendriks et al. 1999). In

NPs promoting the interests of certain professionals, it might be the case that, in order to be part of a project team, one must be qualified in the profession targeted by the NP. This last aspect would require training the team members in a secondary discipline for successfully fulfilling their project duties.

In a project matrix framework the analysis of jobs integration should not stop at the bi-dimensional level of crossing projects and functional units, but rather, for the sake of descriptive accuracy, we should supplement this flat picture of teams with additional dimensions: this would lead to a construction of a team-cube emerging from the organizational matrix, this cube would have as sides - project team (or intra-team) relations, inter-project relations and stakeholder contacts and the triple constraint of time-cost-quality imposed upon every member of a project team. This idea is illustrated in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. The dimensions of a team working in a multi-project matrix organization**

*Source: the author*

From an individual member's perspective, his contribution might be appreciated through the six dimensions: the visible-relational dimensions (the three visible sides of the team-cube) with the team members, organization as a whole and the stakeholders; the invisible (non-relational)-delivery dimensions (time, cost, quality).

Withdrawing a team member, as is suggested in Figure 2, by the orange square, would not only impact the deliverables of a project, but also all the six dimensions of the role played by the team member.

The thickness of the orange square could be read through the relative size of the tasks assigned to the team member in to the overall chain of tasks pertaining to the multi-project organization. In NP environments the stakeholder contact side is more enhanced when it comes particularly to the

financer-project relation and the project beneficiary-organization relation. While juggling with all these dimensions requires a lot of theoretical undergirding, it might point in practice a more complete role of each team member and lead to decision making processes taking into account the intricacies exposed by the organizational role of each team member.

If we try to get a more detailed view of the specific tasks pertaining to an organizational role in multi-projects, a work breakdown structure could easily facilitate the transition from one critical path chain (CPC) set of activities to another set through a procedural arrangement of validating deliverables across the CPC. As a result, this leads to seeing a CPC sets as micro-projects *per se*, asking for project management insights of their own. (Van der Merwe, 1997).

An interesting proposal for further research consists in investigation the management of volunteers working in multi-projects environments. In line with the current paper emphasize on donors, the volunteers could be managed by the board as stakeholders who donate their work time to their preferred projects.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The present quest to answer the questions related to the interplay between the latest research in multi-project management and the specifics of NP management and the insights that could be gained there from, has led to the following results.

The projectification of NPs has to take into account the different developments in organizational design and governance - starting with incorporation and ending up with project-based organizations. This whole process is delineated by the pivotal role of the mission and of the board in strategy casting, and project inclusion.

In terms of strategy, NPs should consider the role played by the projects and project managers in complying with the mission and influencing strategy. We proposed that some projects managers could serve as Board members, being hence a buffer between regular Board members (with their multiple roles), founders, project stakeholders and donors.

In NPs the mechanisms used for project integration should strive for mission coherency and procedural homogeneity, while, at the same time be sensitive to stakeholders in terms of transparency of resource allocation and reporting.

Working in a multi-project context would multiply and enhance the dimensions of project teams, and the matrix organizational design would not suffice to capture the intricacies of the interfaces between the organization, the project network and the projects themselves. A further research proposal consists in building upon the contribution of this paper to describing the multi-dimensional character of project teams in NP, and searching for a set of metrics that could appreciate the role of teams and team members in a multi-project-based organizational setting.

The limits of this study refer mainly to: neglecting the specifics of NPs in terms of voluntary work and the difficulties of assessing organizational results and efficiency, and secondly, due to the method of research, some of the proposals and insights ask for more empirical validation than the one already provided by the literature we have mentioned so far.

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