

Project Management and Sustainability

*Luca Sabini, Newcastle University Business School**

Introduction

The moral imperative to make big changes is inescapable, that what we take for granted may not be here for our children

– Al Gore, 2007

US Vice-president Al Gore's statement above refers to the need for the issue of sustainability to become central to the contemporary political and economic agenda. The World Commission on Environment and Development defined sustainability as the "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987). Sustainability relates primarily to environmental and demographic concerns but, in the light of the recent economic and fiscal crises across Europe and the USA, it increasingly includes social issues such as equality, social mobility, social renewal and financial sustainability (UNCTAD, 2014). Accordingly, concomitant with the growing political interest in sustainability, there has been a growing interest in the study of sustainability both as an academic field of research and as an area of practice. A relatively recent study by McKinsey et al shows that energy efficiency can save the United States \$1.2 trillion a year (McKinsey et al., 2009). Similarly, a growing body of academic research focuses on how sustainability might be achieved as a strategic imperative. In particular, research has emphasised the role of governments (UNCTAD, 2014), corporations (Shrivastava, 1995) and the broader community (Van Berkel, 2010).

While a large body of work focuses on macro-level sustainability issues (e.g.: climate change, consumption of natural resources),

less emphasis has been placed on more practical, micro-level concerns. For example, the role of professional and knowledge workers as key intermediaries in building a sustainable economy and society has received far less consideration¹.

Project Management

This contribution is the description of a European funded research investigating the role of the Project Management (PM) profession in developing a sustainable economy. The focus of this ongoing research is on the role of PM, as an example of a prominent professional occupation, in building a sustainable economy and society. This is important because professionals such as project managers possess the technical skills, competences and knowledge required to successfully implement sustainability initiatives. In the same way that accountants have been involved in developing sustainability reporting tools and engineers in developing sustainable 'green' technologies, so too have project managers been responsible for the development and diffusion of sustainable practices. The role of project managers in this context is likely to be particularly important as a growing trend towards 'projectification' (i.e. the reorganization of tasks and activities as projects) places project managers in a prominent economic and societal position.

With a focus on the role of project managers in sustainability, this research is timely as it is

¹ An interesting initiative led by the Australian Government's National Action Plan for Education for Sustainability (AIRES) aims at fostering sustainability in business and industry through education and learning with a focus on Sustainability in the Key Professions (<http://aries.mq.edu.au/projects/accountancy>).

addressing a key EU research topic: Inclusive, Innovative and Reflective Societies (and in particular 6.1 Inclusive societies²) by investigating how societal well-being is generated and sustained over time.

This project aims to contribute to our understanding of the importance of professionals such as project managers in building a more sustainable economy and society. As such, this research focuses on how the PM profession has contributed to the development, adoption, adaptation, and rejection of sustainability principles and practices.

PM and Sustainability

Error! Reference source not found. (which represent the number of academic publications on this topic) captures the growing interest in sustainability and PM, reflecting (a) the growing importance of this profession as part of the “projectification” of society and (b) the centrality of PM skills, competences and techniques in delivering sustainability.

As economic activity is increasingly based on projects, making these projects more sustainable can provide the building blocks for a more sustainable economy and society. Accordingly, a growing debate amongst practitioners has focused on the issue of sustainable projects³. As part of the drive toward sustainable projects, PM has developed a number of new methodologies, tools and techniques which foreground a concern with sustainability (e.g.: the GPM P5 Standard for Sustainability in Project Management; or the Project Management

Global Sustainability Community of Practice).

From a theoretical perspective, the importance of project managers is not limited to their functional roles as implementers of sustainable, technical solutions, such as the sustainable projects described above, but refers to the broader institutional role that professions exercise in accomplishing radical change. This is important as delivering sustainability may involve challenging assumptions and practices which are deeply institutionalized in order to create and institutionalize new organizational models and working arrangements. An example of changing institutional practices relates to the duration’s shift in the project lifecycle. The delivery of final artefact or service is the normal project end; instead, the objectives of the PM process are starting to take into account the ‘utilization’ of investment of the project beyond the end of project activities (Gareis, 2005, p. 546). This paradigm shift links to the concept of sustainability that consequently arise in the need to: (a) contribute to the optimization of the business case of the investment initialized by the project; (b) manage the project complexity and project dynamics; (c) continuously adjust the project boundaries. In other words building a sustainable economy and society through projects is not an exclusively technical matter, but it involves institutional change (Scott, 2008, p. 219). Hence, theoretically, this proposal relates to the growing debate around the ‘institutional work’ of the profession, focusing on both the purposeful and everyday forms of agency through which professions contribute to creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca,

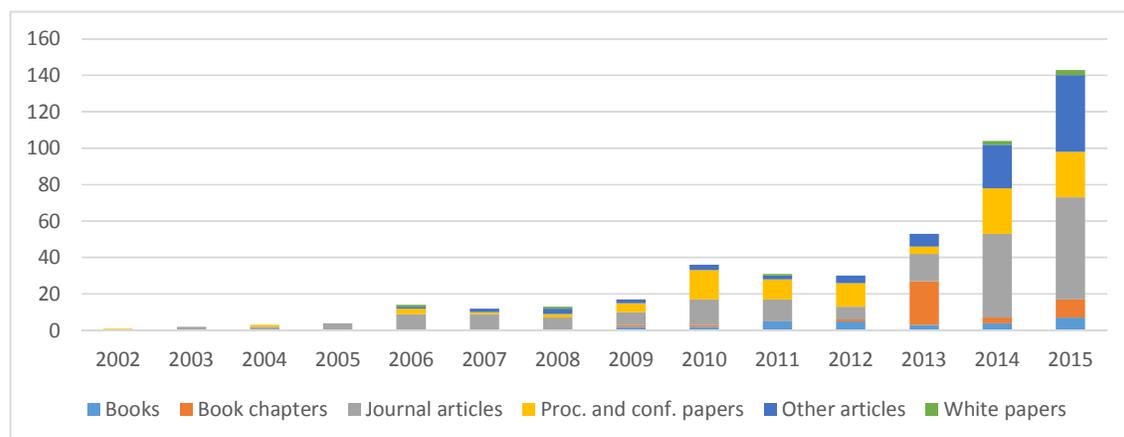


Figure 1: Articles related to sustainability and projects (update from Silvius & Schipper, 2014)

2009).

The research question that drives the research is: what is the role of PM in developing sustainable business practices? (With two sub questions: SQ1 - What is the influence of professional associations with regard to institutionalizing sustainability practices into PM tools & techniques? SQ2 - How do PM practitioners contribute to implementing sustainability practices within projects?⁴

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⁴ Note: the two sub questions are recursive since the way practitioners contribute to implement sustainability practices is also an outcome of the tactic used by professional associations.