

CHAPTER 10

PUBLIC POLICIES AND PROJECTIFICATION PROCESSES

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Introduction

More and more activities for which the public sector is responsible are executed in the form of projects. The causes of this phenomenon, called “projectification” of the public sector, are diverse. Some of them include e.g. the ease of solving complex problems by various stakeholders within interdisciplinary teams, access to external means, liberation from excessive bureaucratisation of everyday activities or – in the European context – the influence of the EU cohesion policy (Godenhjelm et al. 2015; Chaib, 2017). According to Jensen, Johansson and Löfström (2013, as cited in Jensen et al 2017) there are three main reasons which have made projects a very popular tool for the execution of public policies: political (through projects, political actors can show initiative), administrative (projects enable the EU and local governments to execute the idea of governance), and organisational (local actors treat projects as a tool enabling them more liberal and flexible management than in traditional structures).

In a way, projects are the answer to a laundry list of accusations toward the public administration formulated in recent decades, which indicate incompetence in the performance of public tasks, action methods ill-suited to the changing environment, ineptitude, excessive bureaucratisation. Already 25 years ago, in their book (ground-breaking with regard to thinking about the way public tasks are performed), Osborne and Gaebler (1992) formulated a number of postulates concerning necessary transformations in the functioning of the public sector. Under public pressure, governments had to come up with a way to deliver more effective, flexible, and result-oriented services, and products. Projects seemed to be a perfect form for the execution of tasks in the new, “changed” public sector. They were like rain falling on dry ground, thirsty for change of the public sector. However, the initial drizzle before our eyes turns into a downpour, and sometimes

¹ Beata Jałocha prepared the publication as a result of the research project registered under No. 2016/23/D/HS4/01810 and financed from the funds of the National Science Centre, Poland.

even acid rains, flooding the entire public sector in a way which is difficult to predict. It should be remarked that despite the proliferation of projects in the public domain, including their mass use in the process of implementing public policies, their impact on the entire sector is unknown.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse projectification processes in the context of shaping and implementing public policies. Our deliberations aim at joining the discussion about the consequences of project work for the execution of public policies.

The origin and main premises of public policies

Public policies are not an intellectual speculation, they are not created to show the reliability of the approach or the depth of reflection on some collective phenomena which public authorities handle. They are an expression of a responsible approach to the understanding of the public good and the way to manage the complexity of processes connected with securing such goods permanently. The growing complexity and the level of intricacy of real public problems, particularly strategic ones, or as M. Considine (2005, p. 21) writes problems “of the utmost urgency”, created the need for a reliable, multidimensional analysis of these problems and development of suitable solutions.

Complexity and changeability of public problems, which are their immanent features and determine their nature, are at the same time the source of difficulties in dealing with them. A. Zybała (2013, p. 14) believes that the growing complexity of public problems makes it impossible to reduce them to simple components, because there exists an organic interrelation between them, an interaction that creates the dynamics of the problem (and the policy around it), as its components to a large degree remain in dependency on one another. Solving complex problems first requires going beyond the framework of sectoral and industry actions. For instance, preventing pathologies among children and adolescents cannot be effective if we limit such a policy to the single education sector, or to the social welfare policy, or culture. In such case, interdisciplinary action is necessary. Moreover, very often effective solving of collective problems requires involvement – at the stages of defining, analysing, designing, and intervening equally – of various stakeholders representing the public, social, and commercial sector. Meanwhile, the nature of both problem-solving and the environment in which they are rooted changes with time, which on the one hand generates the need for a reliable, multidimensional analysis of complex collective problems and developing solutions in cooperation with various institutions and partners from the social and commercial sectors, and on the other hand – the need to seek flexible forms of action which would enable reacting to changing

and varying detailed problems, depending on their context. As a result, we observe the evolution in the approach to the understanding and being engaged in public policy. While this policy – at the design stage – used to be limited to designing legal rules and regulations which standardised behaviours of various entities toward particular public problems, and at the execution stage – to enforcing the adherence to the established norms, currently it is focused mostly on designing objectives and outcomes of policies, and at the execution stage – on coordinating activities of multiple entities that perform tasks in the area of a particular public policy. In the traditional view of public policy, creation of a policy was clearly separated from its implementation. Creation was the domain of politicians, while implementation belonged to the public administration – the bureaucrats. In such a policy, there was no room for projects. The criterion of the public policy assessment was the long-term effectiveness in the execution of declared objectives. Previously, revealing a collective problem led to the establishment of a new institution (in the broad sense of the term, as e.g. an agency, but also a new act). J.R. Adolino and Ch. Blake (2001, pp. 31-45, as cited in: Zybała (2013, p. 76)) argue that the condition necessary to execute particular public policies is developing an adequate institutional potential and favourable norms. Nowadays, the complexity and the level of these problems' intricacy prompt the creation of networks that enable various entities to pool their resources and learn from one another.

Currently the situation in the environment, and also outside the organisation, changes so rapidly that sometimes the execution of one project changes the meaning of the entire policy. It is not uncommon to observe the effect of reversal, when the achieved project objective in the long-term has effects contrary to what was intended (Prawelska-Skrzypek, Lenartowicz, 2015, p. 96). Projects, especially if inappropriately selected, not stopped at an appropriate moment, uncoordinated, or not managed as a whole, in the course of their execution and through unexpected synergies can squander the adopted concept of public policy. The authors quoted above show how instead of the assumed increase in access to culture and increase in participation, the project results in the exclusion of entire social groups from participation in culture.

In public policy, the key issue is formulating the agenda. It is clear that in dealing with a certain sphere of public affairs, public authorities do not focus on all possible, detailed problems, but only on selected issues and solve them in a particular order. Creating the hierarchy of problems depends on numerous factors and is always a critical moment in the course of the public policy process. Mere definition of the problem is not sufficient to proceed to solve it (M.E. Kraft and P.R. Furlong, 2007, p. 74, as cited in: Zybała, 2013, p. 197). Traditionally, in public management, various techniques are used to alleviate conflicts

connected with assigning a high priority to a certain problem, because each of them is supported by particular interest groups. Thus, elements of the objectivisation of choosing the order of solving public problems are being introduced, according to the previously negotiated rules. The decision to include a given problem into the scope of a certain public policy opens up the field for the execution of projects aimed at solving it. It is easy to note that in this view, the process of public policy is considered as a linear process. In public policy studies, it is an important research current, connected with the analysis of the cycle of public policy, in which preceding and following phases are clearly identified. Meanwhile, the increasing complexity of public policies combined with the advancing projectification in the course of their execution turns linearity into a network of mutual influences, which gives the public policy process a completely different dynamic. It is especially difficult to separate the stages of formulating and implementing. In Poland, it is very well visible in incessant amendments of legislative acts, which are usually considered to be the conclusion of the formulation stage of a particular public policy. Even a single, isolated implementation changes the perception of public problems so significantly that it becomes necessary to change the principles of a given policy. Continuous modification processes of the legislation are the proof that in the course of the execution of the projectised public policies, new important problems and objectives of these policies emerge and they gain emergent character themselves

Projectification of the public sector

The 1990s were marked by an unusual intensification of the application of projects for the execution of various tasks and the phenomenon was called “projectification”. In the text on projectification of the Renault company, Ch. Midler (1995) linked this phenomenon to the changes occurring at the level of organisation. However, it was soon revealed that it was only the tip of the iceberg, and dominated every domain of human life, both in the professional and private sphere. Increasingly often it is observed that we live on projects and in them. Jensen et al. (2016) argue that we are facing the “projectification of everything” – we are becoming a project society (Lundin et al., 2015), in which projects are omnipresent and constitute a kind of “human condition”.

Projectification is a phenomenon that inspires increasing anxiety. The concern of researchers who protest against projectification processes is caused by an array of emerging problems. These include questions connected to the absolute unpredictability of the process, concerns about various organisational pathologies and dehumanisation of activities, no possibility to predict ethical consequences of the assumption that the world consists of a pool of separate projects.

In his work, F. Jensen (2012) revealed the concept of the project society in relation to the concept of disciplinary society after Foucault. Through the comparison of the understanding of activity, space, time, and relationship, he indicated the traps awaiting in the jungle which the natives of the projectised global village inhabit. In a disciplinary society, activity was usually a recurring, space defined action (which occurred in one place), and human relationships existed within a strict hierarchy based on time and space. None of these rules are possible to uphold in the project society. Activities are unique and temporary, they define space (or spaces) where they are executed, and permanent relations are replaced by temporary connections, networks that serve the execution of the task (Jensen et al., 2016). However, consequences of this phenomenon are very difficult to predict, because we do not know what happens to communities which select project as the principal way to execute their ideas. Undoubtedly, they will be relevant, also for the public sector, particularly in identifying collective problems and looking for ways to solve them. Initially, projects “colonised” selected industries, such as construction or advertising, but subsequently, the public sector became projectised as well. This sector, until recently operating on the basis of a repeatable, predictable process driven by bureaucratic machine, underwent changes. But we do not know how it will function in the long term in a global project society. There are many questions that require answering, e.g. How to manage a state through projects? How to build communities around millions of micro-projects? How to prepare subsequent generations for life in a projectified world? Currently, under the influence of the public sector projectification, we can witness a kind of dichotomy in terms of permanent or temporary character of actions taken by public sector actors, which is reflected in the process of shaping and implementing public policies.

Different perception of time in policies and projects – consequences for the integration of results and learning from projects

The temporary nature of the project is the key element in a number of definitions of this notion. Beside financial and qualitative constraints, it is emphasised that what constitutes the core of the idea of the project is precisely its temporal constraints. The tension between change and permanence, temporary and stable character in the context of public organisations and projects is one of the major problems raised by public projects researchers (Forssell, Fred & Hall, 2013; Chaib, 2017). On the one hand, we observe that projects coexist with permanent organisational structures of public units. On the other hand, we are starting

to believe that in certain cases, they start to dominate the mode of operation of these organisations.

According to Lundin and Söderholm (1995) time can be perceived as a linear, cyclical or spiral value. Following this concept, they claim that in the case of an organisation, the perception of time is linear, therefore it represents something eternal. For temporary organisations, such as projects, as opposed to permanent organisations, time always runs out. An organisation's insight and a project's insight constitute two very different views on the perception of time, and they involve profound consequences for the way of thinking about the tasks of the public sector. People deal with uncertainty and time constraints of the project, and thus – with the fear of not being able to complete it in time, by dividing it into stages, fragments. It gives an often deceptive conviction about the possibility of controlling time and being more effective.

Despite the fact that projects are called one of the methods of implementing public policies, decision-makers, responsible for designing and implementing policies, do not always have a choice with respect to the form of executing their actions (Jensen et al., 2013). Often, as a result of various practices and pressures, e.g. political, they are forced to select a project as an action that can potentially bring immediate effects.

It is assumed that outcomes of projects are easily transferable to permanent organisational structures. However, it is increasingly often emphasised that projects can bring positive effects for their participants and beneficiaries, but they end in failure in the case of integrating these effects into comprehensive activities of the organisation as well as long-term policies. It means that projects sometimes become a kind of “parallel organisations”, with continuous external funding, but without cohesion with the organisation in which they are executed (Forssell et al. 2013; Ljöfström, 2010 as cited in Jensen et al., 2017).

The process of learning and achieving emergent results can be therefore decidedly more difficult than it is usually assumed. Firstly, the traditional, sequential model of project execution which the public sector copied from the business sector does not usually have the final stage which would allow the transfer of knowledge (Godenhjelm et al., 2015). The end of the project ends the learning process and the transfer of knowledge to the level of the organisation and public policies becomes impossible. Existing solutions are often ineffectively transferred to the level of practices on the general level of the sector, which can raise concerns as to the justifiability of conducting exclusively project work, which balkanises actions on the level of public policies.

Undoubtedly, investment projects are characterised by greater stability. However, not always the effect of such a project supports the realisation of policy objectives, which has been mentioned in the previous part of this paper (“reversal

effect”). In this context, settling projects from the perspective of their immediate effects, and not their contribution to the realisation of public policy objectives, is criticised. As a result of projectification, undertaking development challenges, especially on the level of rural communes, districts, and provinces, is narrowed down to a list of tasks, and not policy objectives. From the perspective of public policy, relationships built in the course of project execution are often more important than the objectives of isolated projects. It is particularly visible on the local and regional level.

Main challenges for the execution of public policies through projects

When considering the potential possibility of executing public policies through projects, we should also consider what type of social problems can be solved with the use of projects. Jensen et al. (2017) invoke the division of projects due to how complicated or complex they are. Applying the guidelines contained in various project methodologies, we can execute difficult public projects, e.g. construction of a gas terminal, a tunnel, or organisation of a massive sports event. At the same time, these practices do not allow us to equally efficiently solve the problem connected with e.g. social inequalities, ageing society, or pathologies of the labour market. It means that project is not the optimal form of solving every single social problem.

At the same time, due to projectification, problems that are easily operationalised (transformed into projects) are much more readily incorporated into the public policy agenda. It can mean that the actors of the process of public policy execution, dependant on projects, will be selecting these social problems which they can solve through projects, and more complex ones will be put on the back burner. When projects governed by a slightly different logic appear in the public sphere (the logic of external priorities and accessibility of resources for their execution), they are the ones that direct the policy to problems which can be solved through projects. We do not reach their core, or their significance for solving problems relevant to a particular community, but we have arguments concerning the possibility of swift, effective execution of particular projects and thus, resolution of particular matters – perhaps of little overall importance, but a solved problem can be presented as a success of public authorities. Sometimes problems and justifications of their importance are even being attached ad hoc to the arising opportunities (e.g. opening of a grant competition). In such a situation, no-one thinks about taking any pre-emptive action, as this would not give the bonus of political capital (and votes), and it does not allow showing that a burning social issue has been swiftly addressed and resolved, as promised.

That is the role fulfilled by systemic projects that concern permanent problems, indicating the area of permanent activities of public institutions (for instance, PCPR or WUP² often execute such projects which are in fact mini policies, on a local or regional scale).

Nowadays, there is a universal agreement that public policy should be evidence-based. The utility of particular evidence is being discussed, but no-one questions the need to provide a rational justification of a decision and include it into development processes of territorial units. Meanwhile, due to projectification, the decision to undertake some action is often not preceded by a thorough study of the problem from the perspective of the legitimacy of a given project for the execution of policy objectives.

Policy is a continuous process connected with the improvement of the organisation and the fact that it is learning – also from its own experiences. Meanwhile, the project is a one-off enterprise. Often one attempt to solve a problem is actually a test that should be repeated at least twice. Therefore, often the project should be continued, for which there are usually no funds (with the exception of systemic projects that are governed by a different principle). In consequence, another project is undertaken. Many researchers note the lack of ideas on how to ensure the synergy of project effects. It is emphasised that actions of public organisations responsible for implementing policies cannot be limited to the selection of an organisation to execute the project. It has nothing to do with the accountability for the execution of the objectives of public policies (March, Olsen, 2005, p. 119). J. Arcimowicz and J. Śmigielska (2011, p. 330) underline further that a lack of cooperation between organisations executing projects leads to the fragmentation of a policy (multiple entities execute projects that are inconsistent with one another). Projects not only result in particular outcomes, but also create networks of relations and various influences. It contributes to the emergence of new problems and heightens the complexity of public policies in the course of their execution. This phenomenon can be observed, e.g. by following long-term systemic projects of PCPRs, which are a substitute of social policy on a local scale, when each subsequent year increases the complexity of undertaken actions and deepens the interventions.

Research also provides some data suggesting the emergence of certain pathological actions, e.g. negative subsidiarity related to the low quality of services provided by NGOs (Lewenstein, 2010, p. 40). It would seem, however, that a large portion of criticism of projectification does not concern projects as the way of organising actions aimed at achieving particular effects, but a lack of coordinated approach to this mode of operation which undoubtedly increases the

² PCPR – District Family Support Centre, WUP – Provincial Labour Office

efficiency and adaptability of public policies, and supports building relationships with partners. This, however, does not happen spontaneously, thanks to the acquired skills of efficient project management, but requires strategic, holistic planning of processes, as well as the awareness of a possibly destructive role of projects that cause the fragmentation of public policies.

Case study – Lifelong Learning policies (LLL)

Contemporary public policies are complex, complicated, and difficult also due to the fact that it is often impossible to indicate the actor with exclusive, or even more extended than others, competences with regard to the execution of a particular policy. There are numerous collective problems which are solved by various actors, and public policy is the outcome of their actions (most often – projects). One such example is the policy supporting lifelong learning (LLL). In a knowledge-based economy, the adoption of the learning attitude by the entire society is the critical condition of its successful development. Ensuring the development of competences in adults is the basis for building competitive advantage of companies that execute an internal human resources development policy and often in the case of regional clusters, support the development of particular qualifications on a regional scale. Local and regional authorities see to it, particularly through the activities of labour market services. In the recent years, a strong emphasis in school education was put on developing key competences, which constitute foundations for lifelong learning and flexible shaping of development paths. Many companies that specialise in training conduct their business activity in this area. Numerous NGOs, as well, support the development of the management staff of various industries and public organisations. In studying this policy, G. Prawelska-Skrzypek and M. Wiekiera-Michou (2016, pp. 79-94), were looking for the answer to the question about how, in the case of such a complex social phenomenon, and lack of public bodies' formal competences to interfere with its various aspects, is it possible to steer the development of LLL in the region? The analysis of a case study from the Lesser Poland Province carried out by the authors enabled to show the activity of various actors of this policy, as well as the activity of the regional network for LLL, as a successful example of a relevant public policy.

The example will be used to illustrate the fact that the execution of a public policy through projects does not necessarily have to be destructive. To be able to diligently put the premises of a public policy into practice, it is necessary to take into account several assumptions, as presented below.

Firstly, according to Prawelska-Skrzypek and Wiekiera-Michou (*ibid* p. 4), the key to success of such a complex policy executed by numerous actors – to

a large extent autonomous in their decisions – is to create a communication space. The process of communication must fulfil the principle of informing one another about the needs, problems, challenges, trends, predicted changes in regulations as well as executed projects and their outcomes. It enables building a consensus as to directional objectives of this policy, and then creating conditions for soft coordination, soft influence on various stakeholders (that do not violate their autonomy), so that the outcome of their actions is in line with directional objectives of the public LLL policy.

In the studied province, as a result of the project carried out in the years 2006-2008 by the Provincial Labour Office, a network called “Lesser Poland Partnership for LLL” was established; it connects local government bodies, formal and informal education institutions, both public and private, cultural institutions and employers – entrepreneurs operating in the area of non-formal education, and NGOs (*ibid.* p. 7). In 2008, a partnership agreement was signed by 55 institutions and other organisations. One of the clauses of the founding declaration contains an assurance that “content developed jointly by the members of the Partnership network will be recognised by regional political and administrative authorities, and included in the public policy they execute” (*ibid.* p. 8). In the following years, institutions and organisations that created the Partnership executed numerous projects reinforcing the network and expanding the area of its operations (e.g. development of electronic communication tools, promotion, services provided to individuals and organisations interested in services in this area, numerous LLL promotional events, development and implementation of regional standards for education and training services, entity funding of education – introduction of a voucher for educational services). The achievements of the region in implementing the LLL policy were the reason why in 2014-2015 a pilot project of the National Qualifications System was carried out in Lesser Poland. The objective of this pilot project was “to prepare the Polish implementation of an Integrated Qualifications Register and the process of validation of effects of learning” (*ibid.* p. 11). In 2016, the Lesser Poland Partnership for Life-long Learning included 148 member organisations. In the 8 years of operations, the number of partners increased almost three-fold. The network permanently participates in formulating the directions of the LLL policy in the region, and it supports its implementation through various projects (*ibid.* p. 11). The undoubted success of the network would not be possible without: strategic management of the Partnership by the Provincial Labour Office, the creation of the platform for close relationships that enable sharing experiences and outcomes of projects executed by various partners, as well as constant support from regional public authorities for the network and using experiences and outcomes of Partnership work in regional policy. The way of managing the Partnership is founded on

finding balance between various stakeholders, particularly in the decision-making process and it remains in line with the postulates of Hulstijn who states that equally important are: clear determination of tasks, roles, responsibility, rules of communication, members joining and leaving, as well as division of benefits and power (Hulstijn, 2015, p. 290). It should be emphasised that projects executed to implement the LLL public policy in Lesser Poland were not random. They were carefully selected and planned by various actors involved in the process of shaping and implementing the local LLL policy, and supported by systemic projects.

Conclusion

The hope placed in projects by actors involved in shaping and implementing public policies lies in providing rational, controllable products. This does happen quite often – projects enable the execution of difficult, complex objectives. Through rational planning and the application of rules and good practices people complete extraordinary creations, make important discoveries, change reality. At the same time, we should consider what consequences for the public policy can be brought about by the wave of projectification. Certainly, these consequences will not be uniformly positive, and their real effects are very difficult to predict.

However, invoking existing research and looking at examples of public policy execution through projects, it is possible to remark that projectification can have a different impact on different public policies. In the case of complicated, complex policies, adopting projects as the only form of activity appears to be a retreat into the safe idea of a project which feigns taking actions, rather than an effective action taken to solve a particular problem. In policies concerning perhaps difficult, but not overly complex issues, projectification seems not to cause as much damage. It certainly brings about changes, particularly in the pragmatic dimension, entangling persons involved in its execution in mechanisms of project work, based on rigid procedures and methodologies, but it does not allow achieving the objectives of this policy. Yet another, undoubtedly important factor influencing the execution of public policies through projects, discussed in this paper, is the tension between change and permanence, a temporary and stable character in the context of public organisations and projects. In conclusion, it needs to be underlined that there exists an urgent need for an in-depth scientific reflection and discussion about the impact of projectification on public policies, which in the long-term could enable minimising its negative effect on activities conducted for the realisation of public good.

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