

UNSUSTAINABLE SUSTAINABILITY? THE ROLE OF PROJECTIFICATION

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Sustainability focus, encompassing three pillars of environment, economy, and society, is reflected in changes in individual lives, organizations, and societies at large. Alongside, escalation of mezzo-level trend, namely, projectification is observed in all fields of life. Therefore, this inquiry delves into relation of these two concepts and the outcomes this interplay creates.

The aim of research

The main aim of this inquiry is to overview and integrate available scientific literature on sustainability, projectification, its outcomes, and antecedents on individual, organizational, and societal level.

Objectives

The main objective is to propose a conceptual model, integrating projectification and sustainability processes, and to unveil its relation, based on conducted literature review results.

The methods of the research

Bibliographical research method was employed in this research in order to integrate concepts of this inquiry, namely sustainability and projectification. Diverse range of scientific literature has been addressed in the analysis, including seminal work from 1938s on ephemeralization, as well as the most up-to-date empirical evidence on projectification from varying societal contexts.

Theoretical background

Ephemeralization is an inevitable trend in human progression, which is characterized by an accelerating increase in the efficiency of achieving the same or more output while requiring less input, may give us ever-increasing standards of living (Evenstad, 2018). Ephemeralization stimulates technological development as means to repeatedly find ways to increase outputs, while reducing inputs and improve the quality of life (Fuller, 1938). This process is perpetual, creating acceleration, and hypermodernity (Evenstad, 2018, Minelgaite & Hinriksdóttir, 2022).

Management literature has broadly recognized the increasing levels of projectification, which is defined as the share of project work being implemented against the share of “ordinary” work (Schoper, et al., 2018). Increasing number of projects, defined as a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service (Project Management Institute, n.d.), is a result of various improvement that organizations are undertaking, in order to innovate, or gain (maintain) competitive advantage. Often times increased number of projects in the companies reflect need to adjust to changes in technological or legal environment or e.g., increase efficiency (Maylor et al., 2006). In such cases, high number of internal projects are implemented as for example research from Icelandic context indicated 30% of total working hours in the companies were spent on HR, IT, R&D, marketing/sales, and infrastructure projects (Schoper, et al., 2018). Projectification is not limited to organizational settings. Its impact has been observed in societies at large with national projectification levels reaching 40% in countries as Germany and South Africa (Marnevic and Bekke, 2022). Impact of projectification on individual lives is well recorded in scientific literature, recognizing projects as a way in which we construct our own identities (Jensen et al., 2016), but also leading to negative outcomes e.g., burnout, elevated levels of stress, and perceived pleasures (Minelgaite & Hinriksdóttir, 2022).

Sustainability goals is one of the main focal points in modern organizations and societies, particularly in the western world. The number of projects in sustainability field, its impact, and budget size qualifies it to be considered a mega project (e.g., EU Green deal alone has more than one billion euros budget). Sustainability aims at fulfilling the needs of current generations without compromising the needs of future generations, while ensuring a balance between economic growth, environmental care and social well-being, reflecting three pillars of sustainability (UN, n.d.). Sustainability projects provide guidelines and means for individuals, organizations, and societies to advance in environmental, economic, and social sustainability. Current focus in management scholarship, particularly in economies with more advanced environmental sustainability, is social sustainability. On societal level the four social sustainability principles are outlined, namely quality of life, equality, diversity, democracy and social cohesion (Magis & Shinn, 2008). More specific focal points are provided for organizations, defining social sustainability as identifying and managing business impacts (positive and negative) on people - employees, value chain, customers and local communities (Uddin et al., 2023). In the context of work-life intensification, the individual sustainability is gaining scholars' attention, due to the need to counterbalance negative effects of acceleration and become sustainable individuals by creating harmony, interconnection, high levels of self-awareness, thoughts, behaviors, and actions; cultivating continued individual growth in physical health, emotional, social, philosophical, and intellectual abilities (Pappas, 2013).

Main findings

Proposed conceptual model (Picture 1) draws on conducted literature review. The model identifies ephemeralization as a macro level phenomenon, which is antecedent of projectification. Furthermore, projectification is considered as an operationalization mechanism of perpetual acceleration of the context. Projectification impacts all spheres of life, namely, individual, organizational, and societal. It is a widespread phenomenon, accounting 40% of GDP in some economies. Alongside with observable benefits (e.g., efficiency), projectification brings about negative impacts (e.g., burnout), which are particularly observable on individual level. In this regard, projectification has considerable negative impact on individual sustainability.

Sustainability could be considered societal mega-project, with focus on economic sustainability, environmental sustainability, and social sustainability. Sustainability agenda is aimed at addressing all three pillars in different levels (individual, organizational, societal). Numerous programs and initiatives, in other words, projects (or collection of projects), have been established and implemented and have advanced or are advancing achievement sustainability goals.

However, the large number and scale of sustainability projects that individuals, organizations, and societies pursue, contribute to perpetuation of projectification with positive and negative outcomes stemming from it.

Picture 1. Conceptual model: Integration of projectification and sustainability



Source: Author

MAIN RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Projectification, stemming from ephemeralization, impacts individuals, organizations, and societies at large, having positive and negative outcomes. Sustainability projects impact individuals, organization, and societies and contribute to achieving sustainability goals. However, large scale of sustainability projects also contribute to increasing projectification.

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