

## *Let's talk about public projects*<sup>1</sup>

# **PMBOK® and Public Administration**<sup>2</sup>

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## **Introduction**

The PMBOK®<sup>3</sup> Guide is undoubtedly the most important publication in the field of project management. This, of course, also applies to the 8<sup>th</sup> version of this document (PMI, 2025), published in November 2025. With all the undeniable advantages of PMBOK® Guide in mind, in this article I discuss the possibilities of applying its selected elements in public administration.

In this article, when referring to the latest version of this document (both basic components, the Standard, which constitutes the first part, and the PMBOK® Guide itself), I will simply use the notation PMBOK® for simplicity. If I refer to the Standard, I will add the word "Standard." When referring to other, earlier versions, I will provide the full reference.

The processes and practices described in the PMBOK® do not limit their scope of application to any specific subset of organizations. Therefore, they are also intended for the public sector, i.e., projects financed and controlled by government institutions.

## **PMBOK® Cross-Sector Difference Model**

Public administration researchers have long analyzed the differences between public sector organizations and those in other sectors. Projects are a specific type of organization, and therefore the results of these researchers' work also apply to them.

There are four basic models of these differences. Three of them are discussed by Scott and Falcone (1998). The **generic model** states that there are no fundamental differences between public organizations and organizations in other sectors (e.g., Murray, 1975). According to the **core model**, there are fundamental differences between public organizations and organizations in other sectors (e.g., Bozeman &

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<sup>1</sup> 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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<sup>3</sup> PMBOK® is a registered trademark of Project Management Institute

Bretschneider, 1994). The third model is called **dimensional** and states that there are cross-sector differences in some dimensions, but not in others (e.g., Perry and Rainey, 1988). The fourth, **layered model** of cross-sector differences was introduced by Gasik (2023a). According to this model, there are no fundamental differences in the technical and process layers (e.g., schedule management or scope management), while significant differences occur in the business layers (e.g., programs, portfolios).

The authors of PMBOK® do not identify differences across sectors, either at the level of project management practices and processes or at the business level, encompassing programs, portfolios, or the role of projects within the organization. Therefore, they should be considered proponents of the generic (no differences) model. Is this the right approach? We discuss this issue in the following sections.

## Public policies, public programs, portfolios

The most important concept in public administration is **public policy**. There are many definitions of this concept (for an overview, see, for example, Gasik, 2023a). Public policy addresses a specific area of concern or issue and indicates a direction or goal in it, and is implemented or facilitated by the government through the use of specific instruments (Gasik, *ibid.*). Every action of public administration is an element of implementing one or more public policies (e.g., Dye, 2013). Therefore, every public project is also an element of implementing a certain public policy. Public policies in democratic states are shaped by the will of the ruling party, elected in democratic elections. At the highest level of the decision-making hierarchy, political will is significantly more important than managerial and organizational parameters (more: Gasik, 2025).

The concept of public policy appeared and played an important role in the Government Extension of PMBOK (PMI, 2006b), but it is not included in the PMBOK®. The current edition only addresses internal organizational policies regarding the implementation of project management.

**Public programs** are an implementing element of public policy. For example, a central rail transport development policy may be implemented through a centrally established railway construction program. This program is delegated for implementation by the government agency responsible for the development and maintenance of the railway network. In this way, the agency's **project portfolio** is shaped by the corresponding public program.

In public administration, institutional portfolios, like everything else in this sector, are shaped by public policies and programs – and not the other way around, as described by PMBOK® and appropriate for the private sector (PMBOK®, Standard, 1.3.4 Relationship of Portfolio, Program, Project, and Operations Management).

The lack of consideration of public policies in PMBOK® and differences in the structure of the hierarchy of programs, portfolios and projects makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to apply PMBOK® recommendations at a level higher than a single project.

## Can operations be projects?

Although the PMBOK® frequently uses the term "operation," it does not provide its definition in its glossary. It is also not included in the PMI Lexicon of Project Management Terms Version 4.0 (PMI, 2024a). Therefore, it should be assumed that the understanding of this concept found in earlier PMI documents, e.g., Combined Standards Glossary 2<sup>nd</sup> (PMI, 2005) or PMBOK® Guide 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (PMI, 2004), according to which **operations** is "an organizational function performing the ongoing execution of activities that produce the same product or provide a repetitive services.", is valid for the current edition of PMBOK®.

In management practice and scholarship, operations are defined as an organization's activities that transform its resources into value (e.g., Thompson, 1967; Hill, 2000; Stevenson, 2021, and many others). The uniqueness or recurrence of value-providing activities does not determine whether they are considered operations. Therefore, an operation in the public sector includes both the systematic, monthly payment of benefits to those in need and the construction of a monument.

It's easy to see that the PMI definition is inconsistent with the one cited above, which applies to public administration. For PMI, as well as for the management community, paying benefits is an operation. However, the construction of a monument, in the public administration's understanding, is an operation too, because it creates value in itself: promoting a specific historical figure. Similarly, organizing a sporting or cultural event, for example, is generally understood as an operation. However, for PMI, building a monument or organizing an event is not an operation because it is not repeatable (there is no serial process of erecting monuments). PMI contrasts projects with operations, whereas in public administration, the terms "operations" and "projects" are neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive.

In public administration, operations can take the form of projects, which is impossible under the PMI approach, which contrasts these concepts. This difference prevents the literal application of PMI documents in public administration.

Fortunately, in the current edition of the PMBOK®, the source of this discrepancy – the requirement of project uniqueness is no longer so categorical. Project uniqueness, a characteristic that would seem unchangeable for so many years, has been replaced by the uniqueness of the context in which the project is implemented<sup>4</sup>. This is a step in the right direction. I hope, in one of the next PMBOK editions, the requirement of uniqueness of anything related to projects will be dropped.

The fields of public administration and project management are not symmetrical. Project implementation in public administration is subordinated to achieving public policy goals. Projects exist to support or achieve public objectives; they serve the public administration. It is not true that public administration operates to achieve project goals. Therefore, if there is a discrepancy between the fields of public administration and project management, the relevant components (concepts,

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<sup>4</sup> Note that the uniqueness of the environment characteristic is not consistent with the PMBOK® process set. This document does not include a process for verifying the uniqueness of the context; a negative result of this check should preclude the possibility, or at least the rationale, of using PMI documents to manage it. Therefore, the uniqueness of the context has no operational significance.

processes, etc.) of project management should be aligned with those applicable in public administration – and not the other way around.

The appropriate approach in the project management community, where PMI and its publications play a leading role, should therefore be to align the concepts used in project management with those used in public administration. The definition of an operation, as used in public administration, should be accepted. To avoid misunderstandings, the concept of an operational project should be introduced.

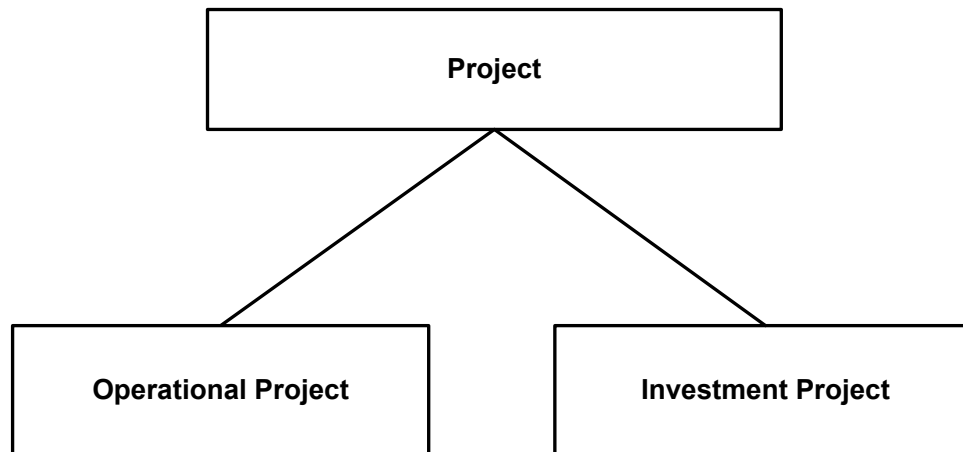


Figure 1. Types of projects in public administration

In the remainder of this paper, I will use the term “repetitive operations” to denote the type of processes considered as operations by PMI.

## Are repetitive operations components of programs?

Can programs contain repetitive operations?

In public administration, programs are, for example, the construction of a road network, the systematic, monthly payment of benefits to specific social groups, or the improvement of the health of society through the construction of hospitals and continuous, repeated health education.

The first of these programs consists exclusively of projects (n.b., as generally understood, which are operations of the institution responsible for road construction). The second consists exclusively of continuous, repetitive operations. The third consists of both hospital construction projects and continuous, repetitive educational processes. The first of these programs is a **project program**, the second an **operational program**, and the third a **mixed program** (Gasik, 2023a, 2023b).

Are all of these types of programs still within the scope of interest of the Project Management Institute? The PMI is evolving its understanding of the concept of a program. But this evolution is going in the wrong direction.

The first Standard for Program Management (PMI, 2006a) allowed that "Programs may include elements of related work (e.g., ongoing operations) outside the scope of the discrete projects in a program" (p. 4). Also, "Some organizations and industries refer to ongoing or cyclical streams of operational or functional work as programs" (p.

4). This version of the standard addressed projects within programs, fully recognizing that programs are not limited to projects.

In the second edition of this standard (PMI, 2008), only projects (and program activities, which have an ancillary role) can be considered program components within the scope of PMI. The standard notes that there may be other understandings of the concept of a program, consisting of operations or functional activities, but these are outside the scope of this standard. That is, while the first edition excluded program components that were not projects, the second excluded entire programs with components other than projects—although their existence was not ignored.

The evolution of PMI's approach to programs containing activities other than projects was completed in the third edition of the Standard (PMI, 2013) and remains in force today. A program is "A group of related projects and program activities managed in a coordinated manner to obtain benefits not available from managing them Individually." This is how they understand the concept of a program in the Standard for Program Management 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (PMI, 2024b) and the analyzed PMBOK®. PMI documents currently omit the existence of programs containing activities other than projects and do not inform about their existence at all.

Thus, instead of properly defining the types of programs and indicating which ones it deals with, PMI decided to throw the baby out with the bathwater and currently pretends that there are no programs other than those consisting solely of projects (and program management processes).

There are two main consequences of this approach for public administration.

First, PMI documents discourage readers from areas where other than project-based programs (operational or mixed) are the most common types of programs. This is precisely the case in the public sector, where the vast majority of programs involve continuous, ongoing support for citizens: the sick, disabled, elderly, lonely, or poor, collecting taxes according to specific rules, or constantly combating the scourge of drug addiction.

Second, by excluding mixed programs, which include both projects and ongoing operational processes, from its scope of interest, it also excludes the projects that comprise them.

A side effect of excluding mixed projects—if this definition is applied precisely—is the dynamic determination of whether a given set of activities is or is not a program. Consider a road safety improvement program. Initially, it consisted of a set of projects for the construction of new, safer roads and the reconstruction of the most dangerous existing road sections. According to the PMI definition, it is a well-defined program. However, during its implementation, the institution responsible for the program concludes that more intensive police traffic control will also improve safety and includes it in this program. Because road traffic control is an ongoing activity, the program no longer meets the PMI definition and should no longer be managed according to PMI standards. This is not in line with common sense.

The examples provided show that the understanding of the concept of a program by PMI is inconsistent with the understanding of the practical functioning of public administration.



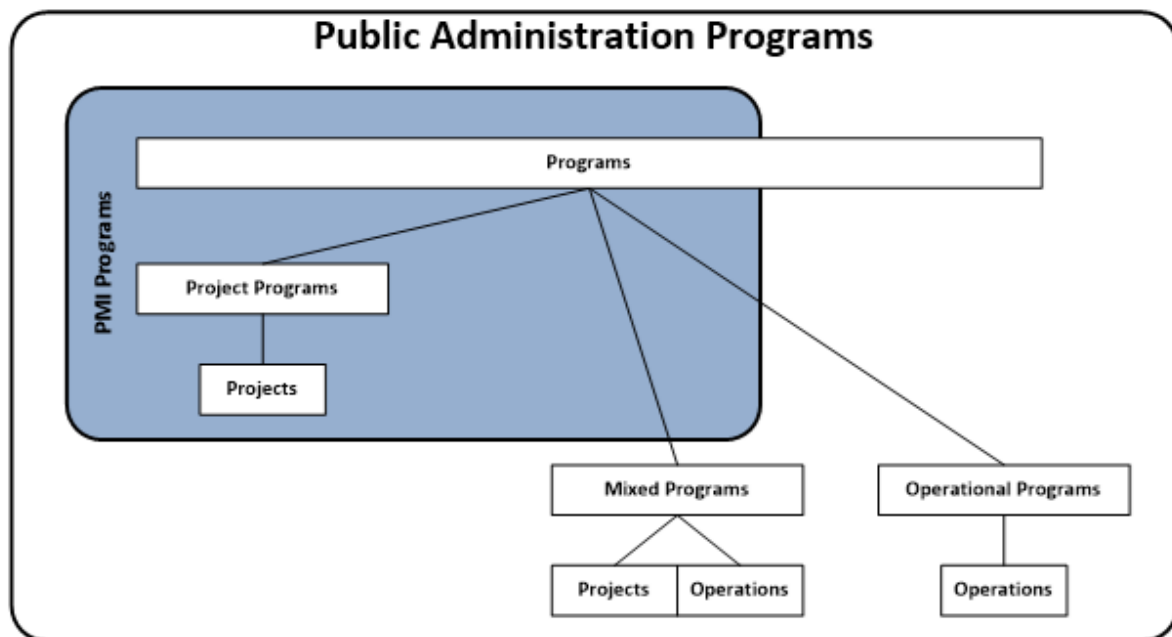


Figure 2. Public administration's programs

PMI should return to the understanding of the concept of a program from the time of the publication of the first program management standard. It should also include mixed programs, consisting of ongoing operations and projects, and inform readers that there are types of projects in which PMI is not interested. Meeting the first of these demands would significantly support the work of those involved in the implementation of public programs. Meeting the second, on the other hand, would avoid disappointment for potential readers, who would immediately know what not to look for in PMI documents.

## Are all projects investments?

An **investment** is an allocation of resources with the expectation that future value will be achieved in excess of the resources expended (e.g., Bodie et al., 2021; Sharpe et al., 1999, and many others). Neither the PMBOK® nor the lexicon (PMI, 2024a) provide a definition of the term investment. A key element of this definition is the time perspective, and a fundamental characteristic of an investment is the risk involved. If the expense generates an immediate benefit and this benefit is not subject to risk, then we are dealing with a project sometimes called an operational (or consumption) project. In the public sector, investments include, for example, the construction of communication infrastructure or research and innovation projects. However, a public sector project that is not an investment is, for example, organizing a festival to celebrate a holiday. A project of organizing an integration event or a trip for seniors by a public institution supporting them also cannot be considered an investment.

PMBOK® claims that every project is an investment (Standard, 2.1.1 Value Delivery Component), which is not true in the public sector, as I showed above. Moreover, in the next section of PMBOK you can read that "The timing of this value realization depends on the nature of the product and the project - it can occur **during the project, immediately after its completion**, or in the short or long term." This means that PMI also considers projects typically considered operational/consumer as investments.

The PMBOK® should include a definition of the concept of investment, which should be consistent with the general understanding of the term and then applied consistently. The concepts of investment projects and operational projects, meaning those directly delivering value, should be introduced (see also the previous section). Many non-investment projects are undertaken in the public sector.

## Organizational structures of public projects

### Agencies or public institutions?

For PMBOK® (Standard, 2.1 Creating Value), the context in which projects are implemented (i.e., practically the organizations implementing the projects) "(...) can range from **government agencies**, enterprises, or contractual arrangements to local nonprofits organizing community events or families organizing their vacations." In the same paragraph, PMBOK® specifies : " (...) this standard uses the term "**organization**" broadly to encompass government agencies, enterprises, businesses, contractual arrangements, joint ventures, and other entities."

None of these records mention such important public organizations as departments or ministries (and therefore also their local branches). Mentioning "government agencies" allows us to assume that the authors of the PMBOK® are supporters of the so-called **agentification** of public administration, which is dominant in the US public administration. Agentification was one of the elements of shaping public administration in a way known as the so-called **New Public Management** (NPM; e.g., Hood, 1995; Ferlie, 1996; Frederickson et al., 2012). However, NPM has been implemented in relatively few countries (e.g., the USA, Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand). Currently, in many countries, for example those belonging to the European Union, the preferred model of state organization is the **Neo-Weberian State** (e.g., OECD, 1999; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004), in which agentification is not the dominant trend. Public administration can be compared to concentric circles, with the government in the center and with increasing autonomy in the more outer circles. On one of the outer circles are agencies (Flinders, 2006). The PMBOK® approach practically reduces public administration to these external entities. But even where NPM has been implemented, many ministries are not subject to agentification, e.g., the Ministry of Defence, Foreign Affairs, or Homeland Security.

Emphasizing the agency of the public sector while omitting other public institutions limits the applicability of the PMBOK to only certain countries, and to a limited number of ministries. PMI documents should address the institutions that constitute the basic structure of public administration: departments, ministries, and their components.

### State: one or many organizations?

When referring to the implementation of projects in public administration organizations, two issues should be addressed:

1. Is public administration a collection of organizations or a single organization?
2. How does the answer to this question affect the way public projects are implemented?

There are two perspectives on public administration. Some public administration researchers and practitioners believe that a country's public administration is a single organization (e.g., Mintzberg, 1996; Hood, 2000; Simon, 2013). Others believe that public administration should be viewed as a collection of interconnected but autonomous organizations (e.g., Kooiman, 2004; Ostrom, 2009; Peters, 2018).

Which of these ways of understanding the state is more beneficial from the point of view of implementing public projects?

To address this issue, the concepts of **Governmental Project Implementation System** (GPIS, Gasik, 2023a) and **Governmental Project Management Maturity Model** (GPM3®, Gasik, Ibid) should be used.

GPIS is a set of processes, methodologies, practices, organizations, databases, project managers, project management maturity models, project contractors and other elements in a given administrative unit, all of which define, shape or influence the way public sector projects are implemented.

GPM3 defines five levels of GPIS maturity:

1. **Initial** level, lack of interest of the state and its components in project management.
2. At the **Local** level, project management methods are defined and applied autonomously in (some) individual public institutions.
3. The **Governmental** level, a central institution(s) shape(s) and monitor(s) the management of public projects.
4. The **Support** level, a central institution supporting the implementation of public projects.
5. The **Optimizing** level, GPIS is systematically improved.

The greatest progress in project management maturity occurs while transitioning from the Local level to the Governmental level. At this level, a central institution, called the **Governmental Project Management Office** (G-PMO), implements practices supporting project management across government agencies. For example, it defines methodologies, collects and distributes knowledge acquired across all agencies, and defines requirements for project management personnel and project management companies. As the GPIS matures, central institutions support project implementation and streamline the GPIS.

Therefore, from the point of view of the effectiveness of public project implementation, the understanding of the state as a single organization, where central institutions support the implementation of projects in all public sector organizations, should be considered more mature.

The PMBOK® does not describe any functions related to the relationships between local and central institutions that shape and support the implementation of public projects. This means that, from the perspective of GPM3, PMI suggests that GPIS should remain at a relatively low, local level of maturity. This excludes the implementation of many practices found at the government level (some of which are listed above) and the benefits that can be derived from their application.



The focus on individual institutions as the highest level of organizations involved in project implementation is characteristic of the private sector, where each private company is accountable only to its shareholders.

PMBOK® should treat public administration as one organization with separate organizational units implementing public projects and a central unit supporting this implementation.

### Institutional stakeholders of public projects

In the public sector, organizational structures are more developed than in the private sector and depend on the level of project maturity of the public administration of a given country.

The PMBOK® only recognizes one type of PMO, which in the public sector is called a **Local PMO** (L-PMO). Governmental PMOs, mentioned above, which have many functions specific to the central organizational level, are omitted.

In addition to the G-PMO, **national audit chambers** are also an integral part of GPIS. These are institutions of the legislative branch of government, authorized to independently audit all public sector entities and projects. Audit chambers also play an important role in recording lessons learned and shaping GPIS.

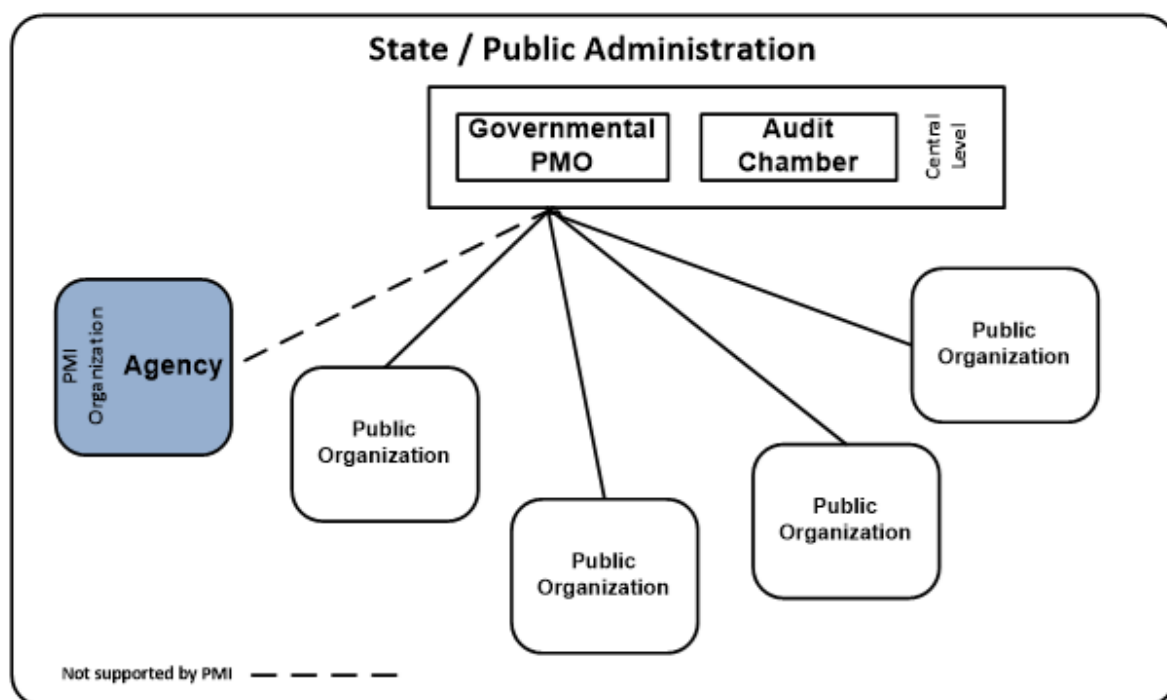


Figure 3. Public administration's organizations engaged in project implementation

If PMBOK® were to be intended for the public sector, it should include the main central institutions supporting the implementation of public projects: Governmental PMO and audit chambers.

## Summary

There are many other provisions in the PMBOK® that are unhelpful or inconsistent with public sector practices, but including them would significantly exceed the permitted size of this article.

In developing this important and useful document, the authors of the PMBOK® adopted a generic cross-sectoral model, which negates the existence of differences between organizations in different sectors. Differences are not identified at the level of the project, the organization engaged in implementing the project, or external factors influencing the project.

Although many PMBOK® elements can be applied regardless of the sector to which they belong, there are also components that, taken from the private sector, make their application in public administration organizations difficult or impossible.

PMBOK® ignores the role of public policies and the influence of central institutions, including audit chambers and Governmental PMOs, on the implementation of public projects. Unlike the common, standard approach, PMBOK® understands the concept of operations—that is, activities and processes that transform organizational resources into values. In public administration, it is irrelevant whether these activities are recurring or one-off. In administration, public programs are hierarchically higher-level aggregates than the portfolios of organizations implementing them. This is a serious divergence from the PMI approach. In public administration, programs can consist of both projects and ongoing, repetitive operations—unlike the PMI approach, which excludes aggregates containing ongoing operations from its scope of interest. According to PMBOK®, all projects are investments. This also contradicts the understanding of this concept in public administration, where many projects serve the immediate purpose of generating public value—not deferred, which is the essence of the investment concept.

Generally, PMI should not change key concepts relating to the public sector.

Perhaps some of these comments apply not only to public administration.

More than seventy years ago, Wallace Sayre, one of the founders of political science, famously stated: "private and public organizations are alike in all unimportant respects." (Sayre, 1953). Perhaps this formulation is too strong in relation to projects (which are a type of organization). But if we replace "unimportant respects" by internal disciplines and areas such as schedule management or resource management, we will obtain a more adequate statement. But portfolio and program management in public administration, where public policies play a decisive role and portfolios are shaped by programs, is completely different than in the private sector. This suggests the adequacy of the layered model of project intersectoral differences (Gasik, 2023a).

The practical consequence of this should be the development of a common PMBOK® core for all sectors. At the project level, documents demonstrating solutions, artifacts, and processes should be developed industry agnostic (PMI wording from author's correspondence with them). However, structural differences between sectors at the supra-project level are so great that it seems necessary to develop standards for program management and portfolio management for each sector separately.

Which does not change my conviction about the global leading role of PMBOK® in the area of project management.

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**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.

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