



TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Ron Schipper and **Gilbert Silvius** – authors of *Sustainability in Project Management* – analyse the impact of sustainability on projects and project management, and why practitioners should take responsibility.

In the last 10 to 15 years, the concept of sustainability has grown in recognition and importance. The pressure on companies to consider sustainability not as a reputation enhancing statement, but as an integrated aspect of business and business value, is increasing.

Awareness seems to be growing that a change of mindset is needed, both in consumer behaviour and in corporate policies. How can we develop prosperity without compromising the life of future generations?

In today's world, the dominant model of production is that of taking natural resources from the earth in order to produce and use products that create pollution and waste. It is evident that with a growing world population and depleting natural resources, such a 'Take-Make-Waste' business model is not sustainable. Sustainability therefore needs change: change of business models, products, services, processes and resources. And as change in organisations is commonly delivered through projects, it makes sense to consider sustainability in projects and also in project management.

But how is this brought into practice? How is sustainability taken into account in project management processes, methodologies and competencies? If organisations put their money where their mouth is on sustainability, it is inevitable that sustainability criteria and indicators will find their way to project management methodologies and practices in the very near future.

THE CONCEPTS

The balance between economic growth and social wellbeing has been around as a political and managerial challenge for more than 150 years. In their 1987 report *Our Common Future*, the UN World Commission on Development and Environment defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations



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to meet their own needs". By stating that "in its broadest sense, sustainable development strategy aims at promoting harmony among human beings and between humanity and nature", the report implies that sustainability requires both a social and an environmental perspective, next to the economical perspective on development and performance. John Elkington's *Cannibals with Forks: the Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business* (1997), identifies these three perspectives as the 'triple bottom line' or 'Triple-P' – People, Planet, Profit – concept: Sustainability is about the balance or harmony between economic, social and environmental sustainability.

However, there are more interpretations of the concepts of sustainability, or the (social) responsibility of companies in creating a sustainable society. For example, the ISO 26000 guideline mentions accountability, transparency, ethical behaviour, and respect for stakeholders' interests, rule of law, international norms of behaviour and human rights as principles of sustainability.

Based on the various other concepts and standards found in literature, we determined six principles of sustainability as guiding principles for the integration of the concepts of sustainability in projects and project management. These six principles of sustainability are:

Sustainability is about balancing or harmonising social, environmental and economical interests – In order to contribute to sustainable development, a company should satisfy all three perspectives of sustainable development: social, environmental and economic.

Sustainability is about both short-term and long-term orientation – A sustainable company should consider long-term consequences of their actions, and not only focus on short-term gains. This principle focuses the attention to the full life-cycle of the matter at hand.

Sustainability is about local and global orientation – The increasing globalisation of economies affects the geographical area that organisations influence. The behaviour and actions of organisations therefore have an effect on economic, social and environmental aspects both locally and globally, and should be considered in this total 'sphere of influence' of the organisation.

Sustainability is about consuming income, not capital – Sustainability implies that the natural capital of the world remains intact. This means that the source and sink functions of the environment should not be degraded. This principle also applies to the social capital, the workforce, of an organisation.

Sustainability is about transparency and accountability – The principle of transparency implies that an organisation is open about its policies, decisions and actions, including the environmental and social effects of those actions and policies. The principle of accountability implies that an organisation is not only responsible for its policies, decisions and actions and their effects, but also acknowledges this responsibility and can be held accountable for these policies, decisions and actions.

Sustainability is also about personal values and ethics – Sustainable development is inevitably a normative concept, reflecting values and ethical considerations of the society. Part of the change needed for more sustainable development will therefore also be the implicit or explicit set of values that we as professionals, business leaders or consumers have and that influence or lead our behaviour. Global Reporting Initiative deputy director Nelmara Arbex puts it simply: "In order to change the way we do things, we need to change the way we view things."

These sustainability principles provide guidance for the analysis of the impact of the concepts of sustainability in projects and project management. ➤



PROJECTS & PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The concepts of sustainability have only recently been linked to projects and project management. And, as projects can be considered as temporary organisations that deliver (any kind of) change to organisations, in terms of different strategies, products, services, business processes, policies or assets, the connection between projects and sustainability makes good sense. However, Mohamed Eid, in his 2009 study on the integration of sustainable development into project management processes, concludes that the standards for project management “fail to seriously address the sustainability agenda”.

Sustainability in project management can be defined as “the development, delivery and management of project-organised change in policies, processes, resources, assets or organisations, with consideration of the six principles of sustainability in the project, its results and its effects” (Silvius et al., 2012).

In this definition, two scopes can be distinguished: the internal and external scope. The internal scope focuses on the delivery and management processes of the project – the project resources, approach and team. The external scope focuses on the deliverables and benefits of the project – the project results and their effects.

The “sustainability is about both short term and long term orientation” principle of sustainability links these



Sustainability in Project Management explores and identifies the questions surrounding the integration of the concepts of sustainability in projects and project management and provides valuable guidance and insights.

two scopes together. And although one could argue that the responsibility of the project manager is restricted to the internal scope – the project delivery and management processes – considering sustainability in project management inevitably includes also considering the sustainability aspects of the project deliverables and their effects. This external scope may not be the primary responsibility of the project manager, but several authors – Russell, 2008 and Turner, 2010 – recognise that the project manager is best positioned to bring sustainability aspects to the table and therefore has an influence not just on the project process, but also on the project deliverable.

If we apply the formulated six sustainability principles to project management, we can identify the most important areas of impact:

Project context – Project management processes should address questions such as: how do the principles and aspects of sustainability influence the societal and organisational context of the project? And: how is this influence relevant or translated to the project?

Stakeholders – The principles of sustainability, more specifically the principles ‘balancing or harmonising social, environmental and economic interests’, ‘both short term and long term’ and ‘both local and global’, will likely increase the number of

stakeholders of the project. Typical ‘sustainability stakeholders’ may be environmental protection pressure groups, human rights groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Project content – Integrating the principles of sustainability will influence the definition of the result, objective, conditions and success factors of the project, for example the inclusion of environmental or social aspects in the project’s objective and intended result.

Business case – The influence of the principles of sustainability on the project content will also need to be reflected in the project justification. The business case of the project may need to be expanded to include also non-financial factors that refer to, for example, social or environmental aspects.

Project success – Related to the project justification in the business case, it should be expected that the principles of sustainability are also reflected in the definition or perception of success of the project.

Materials and procurement – The processes concerned with materials and procurement also provide a logical opportunity to integrate aspects of sustainability, for example non-bribery and ethical behaviour in the selection of suppliers.

Project reporting – Since the project progress reports logically follow the definition of scope, objective, critical success factors, business case, and so on from the project initiating and planning processes, the project reporting processes will also be influenced by the inclusion of sustainability aspects.

Risk management – With the inclusion of environmental and social aspects in the project’s objective, scope and/or conditions, logically the assessment of potential risks will also need to evolve.

Project team – Another area of impact of sustainability is the project organisation and management of the project team. The social aspects of sustainability, such as equal opportunity and personal development, can especially be put to practice in the management of the project team.

Organisational learning – A final area of impact of sustainability is the degree to which the organisation learns from the project. Sustainability also suggests minimising waste. Organisations should therefore learn from their projects in order not to ‘waste’ energy, resources and materials on their mistakes in projects.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

Now that we have assessed the potential impact of sustainability on project management processes and related areas, the question may arise: what’s new? Project managers deal with interests of diverse stakeholders every day, so adding a few new considerations and perspectives may be challenging, but no more than that. Does integrating

the principles of sustainability change the profession of project management?

From the impact of the principles of sustainability on projects and project management it becomes clear that these principles provide new or additional perspectives on the content and the process of the project. So we may conclude that integrating

be characterised by predictability and controllability of both process and deliverables and is focused on eliminating risks, to an approach that is characterised by flexibility, complexity and opportunity.

The basis for the shifts described above is the way the project manager and the project management profession

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sustainability requires a scope shift in the management of projects; from managing time, budget and quality, to managing social, environmental and economic impact.

Adding new perspectives to the way projects are considered also adds complexity. Project management therefore needs a more holistic and less mechanical approach. The traditional project management paradigm of controlling time, budget and quality, suggests a level of predictability and control that is just not realistic in complex changes. The integration of sustainability logically also requires a paradigm shift: from an approach to project management that can

sees its role. Traditionally, project managers tend to serve their project sponsors and ‘do what they are told’ to do.

Our core message is a call to action to the project management profession to take responsibility. Responsibility for a more sustainable development of organisations and business. Taking up this responsibility changes the role of project managers and therefore changes the profession. Sustainability in project management inevitably implies a mind shift: project management is no longer about ‘managing’ stakeholders, but about engaging with stakeholders in realising a sustainable development of organisation and society.