

## ISOMORPHIC MECHANISMS OF PROJECTIFICATION IN THE POLISH PUBLIC SECTOR

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to discuss isomorphic mechanisms which accompany the process of projectification in the Polish public sector.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Research material used to develop this text was gathered during a comprehensive research project conducted between 2017 and 2020. The project utilized the instrumental case study method, focusing on the phenomenon of projectification within the Polish public sector. It employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques, such as document analysis, quantitative data analysis, and in-depth interviews.

**Findings:** The study revealed that isomorphic mechanisms (coercive, mimetic, and normative), which lead to the projectification of the Polish public sector, appear at the macro level (sector), meso level (public organizations), and micro level (public sector employees) of the projectification research. Depending on the level of analysis of the phenomenon of projectification, different forms of isomorphic mechanisms dominate. At the macro level, which covers the entire sector and its public policies, coercive mechanisms played a central role. At the meso level, within organizations, both mimetic and coercive mechanisms proved crucial. Normative mechanisms, in turn, held prominence at the micro level, that is, among public sector employees. It is important to note that these mechanisms often intertwined and overlapped with each other. The article describes numerous examples of specific isomorphic mechanisms that manifest themselves in the studied organizational field.

**Research limitations/implications:** The study examined a limited sample of public projects carried out in Poland and several public organizations. In the future, it would be worthwhile to consider a broader context, taking into consideration business and non-governmental organizations as well. This would facilitate a deeper reflection on those isomorphic mechanisms which support the projectification process within a broader scope.

**Practical implications:** In practical terms, this study makes it possible to comprehend the mechanisms that drive the transfer of project knowledge and bring about organizational and structural transformations within the public sector. These mechanisms can aid practitioners in terms of deepening their reflection on seemingly unnoticed yet significant changes which take place in project-based organizations.

**Originality/value:** The article presents a fresh perspective on the understanding of projectification processes based on isomorphic mechanisms.

**Keywords:** projectification, public sector, institutional isomorphism.

**Category of the paper:** Research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Projectification is a phenomenon which consists in the institutionalization of project-based practices at various levels of social life (Jacobsson, Jałocha, 2021). It involves not only an increase in the number of projects but also a change in their role in organizational management and entire sectors of the economy. According to Voros Fregolente et al. (2022), projectification relies on the use of project management tools, both in work and in daily life tasks. Initially, the discussed phenomenon was observed at the level of individual organizations. For instance, Christophe Midler (1995) describes the transition of Renault from a functional organization to a project-based organization. However, it is more difficult to discern the changes that projectification induces in a broader context, such as economic sectors, regions, countries, or multinational organizations. To understand the broader context of this phenomenon, it is essential to consider the mechanisms that contribute to the spread of projectification across various industries and sectors, also on a global scale. Initial attempts are being made to understand these processes, focusing on national economies (Ingason, Fridgeirsson, Jonasson, 2019; Schoper, Wald, Ingason, Fridgeirsson, 2018; Wald, Spanuth, Schneider, Schoper, 2015), sectors (Jałocha, 2019), and multinational organizations (Büttner, 2019; Godenhjelm, Lundin, Sjöblom, 2015; Jałocha, Góral, Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2019). Still, these observations often focus on the effects of projectification processes, the transformations that occur under their influence, and attempts to measure this phenomenon.

This article attempts to present particular isomorphic mechanisms that influence the development of projectification. This will be illustrated through the example of the Polish public sector, which in the past two decades has undergone significant changes brought, among others, by projects, especially those co-financed by the European Union. Importantly, the public sector has a profound impact on the business and non-governmental sectors. This implies that projectification mechanisms observed within public organizations have implications for other sectors: for instance, in terms of shaping public policies and compelling organizations that do not belong to the public sector to undertake specific actions. To sum up, the identification of projectification mechanisms within the public sector provides insights into processes which occur outside of this sector, but which develop under the influence of public regulations and organizations.

The theoretical backdrop for the flowing discussion and presented model is the concept of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio, Powell, 1983). The research study that served as the basis for the presented conclusions was conducted between 2019 and 2021. The article begins by introducing the concept of projectification and the levels at which it can be studied. Subsequently, the concept of institutional isomorphism is discussed. The next section describes the methodological assumptions and results of the conducted research. The article concludes with a summary of the discussed issues.

## 2. Projectification

Research on the concept of projectification originated in the 1990s with Christophe Midler's longitudinal study conducted at Renault. Midler observed that the growing number of projects had a significant impact on both the organizational structure and culture of the company. It is now recognized that projectification extends beyond organizational boundaries and can be observed at various societal levels. The scope of projectification encompasses not only formalized organizations but also states and sectors. As Jensen et al. (2016) write, we are currently witnessing a pervasive phenomenon known as "the projectification of everything", whereby projects have permeated business, public and non-governmental sectors, and even our personal lives. Indeed, as research on projectification progresses, it reveals the increasing complexity of this phenomenon. Voros Fregolente et al. (2022), in their analysis, identified as many as 55 distinct definitions of projectification, reflecting its diverse manifestations across different organizational contexts and individuals' private life.

We can distinguish several levels where projectification is observed and can be subjected to scientific analysis. The typology of projectification levels includes the meta, mega, macro, meso, and micro levels (cf. Table 1).

**Table 1.**

*Typology of projectification research levels*

| Projectification research level | Research area  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Meta                            | Relations and trends transforming global social structures |
| Mega                            | Societies, countries, supranational organizations          |
| Macro                           | Industries, sectors  |
| Meso                            | Organizations  |
| Micro                           | Individuals  |

Source: Jałocha (2018), Jacobsson, Jałocha (2018); Jałocha (2021).

At the meta level, we can observe relations and trends that transform global social structures. The phenomenon of projectification poses challenges when studied at the meta level since changes brought by projectification on a global scale may occur gradually and thus become observable only in a long-term perspective (Jałocha, 2019). At the mega level, we observe the projectification of entire societies (Jensen et al., 2016; Lundin et al., 2015), countries and regions (Fred, 2018), and supranational organizations (Büttner and Leopold, 2016; Godenhjelm et al., 2015; Jałocha et al., 2019; Wagner, Huemann, Radujković, 2022). The projectification of sectors and industries is examined at the macro level. In this case, research often concerns the public sector (Hodgson, Fred, Bailey, Hall, 2019; Jałocha, 2021) or highly projectified industries such as the automotive sector (Midler, 2018). The meso level represents the level of organizational projectification, which has been the most extensively studied so far (Maylor, Turkulainen, 2019). It involves increasing the role of projects within organizations through various means, including implementing changes in organizational

structures and ways of executing tasks (Bergman et al., 2013; Fred, Hall, 2017; Wenell et al., 2017). Finally, there is the micro level where research is focused primarily on the consequences of projectification for individuals, such as changes in how people work, the precarization of work, and disruptions to work-life balance (Jałocha, 2021).

Research conducted across all five levels presented in the typology confirms that projectification has largely exceeded its original, organizational understanding and acquired a wider social dimension. In the present article, projectification will be examined at the macro level, specifically within the public sector, as well as at the meso level (organizations) and micro level (employees). This selection is justified by the presence of isomorphic mechanisms at all three levels of analysis.

### **3. Institutional isomorphism**

Isomorphism refers to the similarity of processes and structures between two organizations, resulting from emulation or independent development under similar constraints. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) were among the first to explore the scientific inquiry into why many organizations resemble each other. They expanded on the research conducted by Meyer and Rowan (1977). The latter discussed specific processes that generate rationalized myths of organizational structure, leading to isomorphism: relational networks, legal mandates, and leadership in organizations (Ramanath, 2009). Building on Meyer and Rowan's assumption that organizations are structured by phenomena in their environment, that they become isomorphic to their environment, DiMaggio and Powell searched for sources of organizational similarities not only in the need to increase operational efficiency or existing inter-organizational competition. In their groundbreaking work, they presented the conceptualization of three types of isomorphism. In general, isomorphism is expected to take place in an organizational field defined as "a system of organizations operating in the same realm as defined both by relational linkages and by shared cultural rules and meaning systems" (Ramanath, 2009; quoted in: Scott, 1998, p. 129). The organizational field also encompasses the area of relationships, interdependencies, cooperation, and conflicts, which are governed by certain institutional rules. Within this area, there operate forces that foster similarities between organizations and, over time, may limit their willingness to embrace change (Marczewska, 2016, p. 190).

Di Maggio and Powell identified: (1) coercive isomorphism (2) mimetic isomorphism, and (3) normative isomorphism. The first that stems from political influence and the need for legitimacy, the second results from responses to uncertainty, while the third is associated with professionalization (Frumkin, Galaskiewicz, 2004).

It often happens that these three mechanisms occur simultaneously (to a greater or lesser extent). At the same time, as Frumkin and Galaskiewicz write, “only coercive isomorphism is linked to the environment surrounding the organizational field. Mimetic and normative processes are internal to the field and help explain the spread of roles and structures” (Frumkin, Galaskiewicz, 2004, p. 285). The three isomorphic processes distinguished by DiMaggio and Powell exhibit distinct characteristics (DiMaggio, Powell, 1983; Jałocha, 2021; Marczevska, 2016; Slack, Hinings, 1994; Wróbel, 2011). Coercive isomorphism occurs when an organization is under formal or informal pressure from other organizations on which it depends, compelling it to adopt patterns of action expected by powerful entities within the organizational field. Mimetic isomorphism leads to organizational changes resulting from the emulation of structures and practices of other organizations, particularly those perceived as successful. This type of isomorphism is especially observed when individuals and organizations face uncertainty and seek solutions that would help them deal with such situations. In turn, normative isomorphism pertains to professionalization processes and the definition of work methods and conditions, to legitimize professional autonomy within specific professions. Normative isomorphism is fostered, among others, by similar educational processes and reinforced through interactions within industry networks (e.g., international project management networks).

#### **4. Methodology**

The research material used to develop this text was collected as part of a larger research project conducted between 2017 and 2020. The study had a broad scope and focused on the projectification processes within the Polish public sector<sup>1</sup>. The research method employed in the project was instrumental case study, and the analyzed case was the phenomenon of projectification in the Polish public sector under the influence of the EU. The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative research techniques, including document analysis, quantitative data analysis, and in-depth interviews.

The research was characterized by a multi-stage and multi-method approach. It consisted of the following elements: document analysis, quantitative data analysis, and qualitative research. Prior to the actual data collection, an in-depth literature review was conducted concerning projectification processes within the public sector.

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<sup>1</sup> The study was carried out as part of the research project no. 2016/23/D/HS4/01810 funded by the National Science Centre. The comprehensive research findings are available in Jałocha, 2021.

The following data sources were utilized:

- Data on projects from the SIMIK database for the years 2007-2013.
- Expert interviews.
- In-depth interviews with the management staff in twelve public organizations.
- In-depth interviews with project managers and team members in twelve organizations.
- Documents such as statutes, organizational charts, documents concerning public policies and implementation of EU programs.

The research was conducted with careful attention to research rigor and ethical aspects. All interviews were carried out anonymously, recorded, and later transcribed. Statistical data regarding public projects were obtained from a publicly accessible database (i.e., SIMIK).

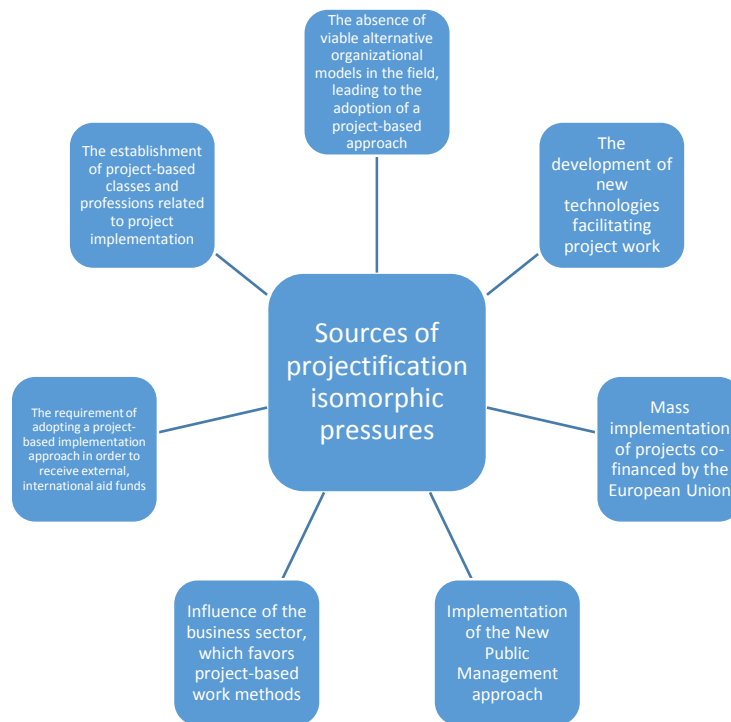
This paper provides a partial representation of the obtained findings, specifically focusing on the isomorphic processes identified during the research. It serves as an extension of the thread extracted during the inferential process conducted within the aforementioned project, with the purpose of answering the following research question:

*What isomorphic mechanisms influence the projectification of the public sector in Poland?*

The next section of this article presents the research results which pertain to this question.

## **5. Isomorphic processes of the projectification of the Polish public sector – research results**

The research has shown that coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures influencing the changes toward projectification in the Polish public sector have multiple sources. The influence of the EU stands out, as it conditioned the allocation of aid funds on the adoption of a project-based approach, leading to the widespread projectification of the Polish public sector. However, the EU was not the sole actor in the organizational field to cause significant sector transformations. The sources of observed isomorphic pressures can also be found in the influence of the business sector, consultants, macroeconomic changes, globalization, the implementation of New Public Management principles, or the development of modern technologies facilitating project work in virtual and distributed teams (cf. Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Selected sources of isomorphic pressures which drive the development of the projectification of the Polish public sector.

Source: own research.

Depending on the level of analysis of the phenomenon of projectification, different forms of isomorphic mechanisms prevailed (Jałocha, 2021, p. 215). At the macro level, which covers the entire sector and its public policies, coercive mechanisms played a central role. At the meso level, within organizations, both mimetic and coercive mechanisms proved crucial. Normative mechanisms, in turn, held prominence at the micro level, that is, among public sector employees. At the same time, it is important to highlight that these mechanisms often intertwined and overlapped with each other, which confirms the observation (Mizruchi, Fein, 1999) that isomorphic mechanisms are not always empirically distinguishable. They can occur simultaneously, and their effects can stack on each other, making it challenging to unequivocally attribute a specific effect to a particular isomorphic mechanism.

### Coercive mechanisms

The emergence of coercive pressures in the organizational field at the level of the entire public sector was driven by the mismatch between the project-based approaches of the EU (implementing public policies based on programs and projects) and the limited level of projectification in the Polish public sector. This discrepancy created a misfit that encouraged the member state to increase its alignment (goodness of fit) with the EU-established principles (Börzel, 2003). Consequently, the Polish public sector adapted and transformed its public policies management toward a model based on programs and projects (Jałocha, 2021). Given the strong need for external funding and the EU playing a pivotal role in providing resources in

the organizational field, the public sector had to conform to the imposed form of resource allocation and implementation – through projects. Coercive pressures were also evident in the ways organizations interacted with each other and reported on the progress of their projects: detailed guidelines concerning reporting procedures, tools, including IT systems, were determined based on the EU's expectations. Coercion is also manifested in the adjustment of programs and policies to the timing of EU programming periods. The internal public policies of the country are programmed and coordinated with successive programming periods of the EU.

### **Mimetic mechanisms**

The lack of experience in project-based implementation of tasks prompted Polish public organizations to emulate those institutions that had such experience. This is largely justified by the easiness and intensity of the projectification process under the influence of the EU. Project-based working methods were not questioned, and organizations began to emulate those who “did it well.” In other words, project tools that proved successful in other member states were copied. Over time, as Polish public organizations acquired competencies, mimetic processes also took place locally. Soon, organizations that excelled in project management emerged in Poland and came to be regarded as role models, serving as a recognized source of good practices.

At the organizational level, mimetic processes manifested themselves, among others, in the creation of organizational structures. Various types of public organizations established very similar units with similar tasks and goals. These units aimed to enhance the effectiveness of project implementation or project management. Regardless of the institution type, whether it was a hospital, university, or city office, similar organizational units were formed with the primary task of securing funds for projects and subsequently supporting their efficient management.

### **Normative mechanisms**

Normative isomorphism occurs when employees in organizations adopt the dominant behaviors of their professional communities, collectively defining appropriate ways of conduct for their professional groups (Jałocha, 2021). This process involves professional socialization, which entails embracing rules and attitudes characteristic of a particular professional group. Isomorphic patterns of action are often communicated to professional groups through organizations in which they are active, such as universities, training and certification institutions, workshops, and industry-specific media.

The research has shown that the source of normative isomorphism in the projectification process of the Polish public sector can be identified as early as the initial stages of socio-political transformations at the turn of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Public organizations that started operating in a completely new political and organizational



system lacked project management competencies. As a result, external organizations and specialists were often hired to train sector employees. This knowledge transfer process created a new group of professionals – project workers. A particular intensification of knowledge transfer occurred with the emergence of EU pre-accession programs and other programs supported, among others, by the United States. Under the influence of the EU, a group of professionals specializing in projects, including EU projects, emerged in the analyzed organizational field. “Project agents” and the “project class” (Fred, 2018; Kovách, Kučerová, 2006) proliferated intensively in the organizational field where public organizations operate. In the Polish public sector, these groups appeared largely because of an extremely intense training process. The mass implementation of projects was preceded by such training delivered by various types of organizations – EU institutions, businesses, training companies, universities. Project change agents transferred new knowledge to the organizational level, which influenced the standardization of project management methods in public organizations, the establishment of project units in organizational structures, and the very language used in organizations. The research also reveals the influence of international project management associations through certification programs for the sector’s employees and the pressure to use selected professional project management tools, such as Prince2. Professional project associations in Poland also play an important role in shaping normative pressures, as was also observed in research on project management professionalization in Germany (Wagner, Huemann, Radujković, 2022).

## 6. Summary

Isomorphic mechanisms leading to the projectification of the Polish public sector were observed at the macro, meso, and micro levels of research. They appeared in the transformations occurring in public policies and task implementation methods at the sector level, but also in the change of organizational practices, structures, and the way sector employees work. Projectification is not limited merely to the fact that organizations start creating projects. Indeed, far-reaching transformations are observed, such as changes in national legislation or methods of implementing and formulating public policies.

Isomorphic processes were also evident in the language used in formal communication within organizations and among their employees. This language is reflected in organizational documents and in everyday communication practices of the staff. In the case of the studied sector, the language of projectification appeared on multiple levels: in the formulation of public policies, the content of organizational documents, elements of visual identity appearing on buildings, names of organizational units, and positions and ways of expression of sector employees (Jałocha, 2021). From small municipal offices to large public universities, hospitals,

and ministries, project-based practices are transferred through coercive, mimetic, and normative mechanisms.

Despite the research focus on the projectification of the public sector, primarily influenced by EU projects, it is important to emphasize that these processes do not occur in isolation. In fact, various institutions representing all three sectors operate within the organizational field of the public sector. Building on the research of Frumkin and Galaskiewicz (2004), the actions undertaken by the public sector have been conceived as playing a central role in initiating the structural transformation of other organizations. Finally, regulations created by the public sector, including, for instance, principles concerning the distribution of public funds in the form of projects, also have an impact on other sectors.

Comprehending the isomorphic mechanisms accompanying the projectification of the public sector in Poland provides us with opportunities to explore new research fields concerning interactions between organizations undergoing the projectification process, not only within the public sector but also within the non-governmental and business sectors.

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