

PARADOXES OF PROJECTIFICATION. CASE STUDY OF POLISH NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Marta MAŁECKA-DOBROGOWSKA

Białystok University of Technology; marta.malecka-dobrogowska@pb.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0001-7247-9725

Purpose: This study analyzes paradoxical tensions in project management within non-profit organizations (NPOs), addressing a significant gap in the literature by examining the impact of projectification on the balance between strategic, operational, and mission-driven objectives.

Design/methodology/approach: A survey was conducted among 385 Polish nonprofit organizations, including foundations and associations. This study employs a theoretical framework grounded in paradox theory to examine the interplay among projectification, funding, and mission alignment.

Findings: Four key paradoxes were identified. The identity paradox concerns the tension between mission and project objectives. The temporality paradox is defined as the incongruity between short-term funding cycles and long-term organizational sustainability. The flexibility and structure paradox is the tension between standard project procedures and the need for adaptive, flexible actions. The learning paradox is a phenomenon in which innovation and learning are constrained by donor pressure for accountability.

Social implications: The findings offer practical guidance to nonprofit leaders and policymakers who aim to balance project delivery, mission, and funding sustainability.

Originality/value: This study presents a novel application of paradox theory to project-based nonprofit organizations, underscoring the tensions that have received insufficient attention in project management literature. A comparative approach enables differentiation between project-oriented and non-project-oriented nonprofit organizations.

Keywords: Projectification, Paradox theory, Funding, Nonprofit organizations, Project management.

Category of the paper: Research paper, case study.

1. Introduction

In recent years, a substantial shift has been observed in how nonprofit organizations (NPOs) execute their missions, provide assistance, and engage in development activities. These organizations have assumed a predominant role in contemporary responses to significant challenges, overseeing and financing projects and serving as the primary drivers of many development initiatives. Consequently, projectification as an organizational, managerial, social,

and cultural phenomenon applies to these organizations. A survey of the Polish nonprofit sector found a growing share of projects in its operational and strategic activities. The projectification of these entities has emerged as a model for inter-organizational cooperation, with paradox theory serving as an important framework for their study in the context of contemporary grand challenges (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, Chalkias, Cacciatori, 2018; Ika, Munro, 2022). These social organizations, mainly the foundation and association types, are compelled to respond to these challenges. A close examination of the scholarly discourse on projectification reveals a series of contradictions. Researchers' interest in projectification points to its positive and negative consequences at different levels of the organization (Aguilar Velasco, Wald, 2022). Scholars have postulated that projectification is unavoidable (Huemann, 2022; Nieto-Rodriguez, 2021). Conversely, they identified paradoxes that could serve as catalysts for projectification or deprojectification (Jacobson, Jałocha, 2025). This phenomenon is accompanied by a series of organizational tensions and contradictions, rendering paradoxes a tangible and unavoidable experience for any organization (Carmine, De Marchi, 2023). A recent nationwide survey of the Polish nonprofit sector confirmed significant projectification (Małecka-Dobrogowska, 2025). A survey was conducted among non-profit organizations, the results of which indicated that those engaged in mass project activities faced a distinct paradox regarding the dilemmas posed by the imperatives to acknowledge the preeminence of project objectives, organizational mission, temporal funding, and sustainability. Furthermore, a variety of organizational and inter-organizational tensions were identified, both within NPOs that did not incorporate projects into their activities and within the collaboration of the NPO sector with business and public partners in addressing grand challenges. Projectification is associated with professionalization; however, it is also a search for a balance between the mission-driven, civic, and often idealistic nature of these entities' activities. However, allowing projectification to continue in organizations and society, despite the tensions and contradictions encapsulated in the "unpacked" paradox formula, might prevent the effective realization of project goals and organizational objectives (Naderpajouh, Matinheikki, Keeys, Aldrich, Linkov, 2023). This is particularly true for organizations in which projectification is the main development scenario for maintaining project-based external funding sources. This study explored three research questions:

- 1) What contradictions and tensions, framed in the context of paradox theory, can be identified and applied to the projectification of the nonprofit sector?
- 2) What types of contradictions and tensions, captured as paradoxes in the form of content clusters, emerge from the survey of Polish nonprofit organizations?
- 3) How do these paradoxes affect governance, sustainability, and mission alignment?

A narrative literature review was conducted to address the three research questions, and the results of an umbrella review of systematic reviews related to paradoxes in project management, projectification, and project studies were analyzed. Systematic reviews were selected based on their relevance to and direct connection with the theory of paradoxes in

project management (the so-called umbrella review). This approach was intended to minimize selection bias and ensure the review's comprehensiveness. Therefore, paradox theory and the tensions and contradictions surrounding project management were considered, with particular attention paid to the potential applicability of these approaches to the paradoxes identified in nonprofit sector projects. The following article was developed with the following three objectives. The objective of this study was to apply the paradoxes identified in the literature within new projectification contexts and search for references to the specifics of nonprofit organizations. The realization of this objective enables the formulation of recommendations for identifying paradoxical tensions inherent in routine organizational activities. Second, the study identified four clusters of meanings obtained from a survey of Polish nonprofit entities. These clusters are related to the paradoxes identified in the extant literature. Third, the author considers how paradoxical tension can be resolved. This was achieved by presenting potential scenarios for "unpacking" paradoxes and applying a zoomed-in and zoomed-out perspective (Jarzabkowski et al., 2018). This study aims to address the existing gap in the analysis of projectification from the perspective of nonprofit organizations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Paradox and tension

The following section addresses the concepts of paradox and tension. In this discussion, a paradox is understood as a system of inextricably linked yet contradictory elements that, in management practice, force a binary choice (Schad et al., 2017). This phenomenon, described by Smith and Lewis (2011) as the coexistence of interactive opposites that persist over time, allows for the identification of 'hidden' tensions within complex organizational systems. Analyzing and resolving paradoxes and internal and inter-organizational tensions are imperative for achieving project goals (Andriopoulos, Lewis, 2010) and for the optimal functioning of the entire organization (Wiewiora et al., 2022). The identification and analysis of paradoxes in complex inter-organizational contexts can reveal "hidden" paradoxes — those that become dormant, overlooked, or ignored within parts of the system (Smith et al., 2011).

According to Jarzabkowski et al., this poses an additional research challenge by demonstrating the nature of paradoxes among different entities, places, and times. Consequently, the analysis of paradoxes in managed organizations requires a zoomed-in-zoom-out approach (Jarzabkowski et al., 2018). The aforementioned process entails two primary stages: first, the process of zooming in, which entails the analysis of specific details and local contexts; and second, the process of zooming out, which entails the analysis of contradictions from a further inter-organizational perspective, with particular attention directed towards

hidden, nested tensions and their complex interconnections (Schad, Bansal, 2018). To capture the specific nature of Polish NGOs, a 'zoomed-in-zoom-out' approach was applied. It allowed for the simultaneous analysis of local operational contexts (zooming in) and broader, inter-organizational contradictions arising from funding cycles (zooming out), which is essential for analyzing the paradox of 'permanent' temporality. To analyze the collected research material in the context of applying paradox theory to the results of this study of the nonprofit sector in Poland, a narrative review of the literature was conducted, with a primary focus on systematic reviews (2015-2025) available in the Google Scholar database indexing both trade and academic publications – which is crucial for the interdisciplinary nature of project management in the nonprofit sector. The search included phrases such as: 'paradox management', 'projectification NGO', 'systematic literature review project paradox', and 'tensions in non-profit organizations'. The following table presents the context in which the paradoxes emerge.

Table 1.

Summary of the key articles concerning paradox and tensions within the project and NPO context

Study Focus	Items		
	key paradox theory context	analysis approach	author
Intangible assets and performance tensions in nonprofit	Tensions between financial constraints and social value in the context of intellectual capital and performance management.	Systematic, PRISMA-guided literature review	Buonomo, Benevene, Barbieri, Cortini, 2020
Paradox theory in corporate sustainability	Detective, sensemaking, and responsive uses of paradox theory.	Systematic Literature Review	Carmine, De Marchi, 2022
Paradoxes and tensions in inter-organizational relationships	Knowledge sharing vs. protection, unity vs. diversity, flexibility vs. rigidity, autonomy vs. accountability, exploration vs. exploitation , cooperation vs. competition, economic vs. social logic, short-term vs. long-term orientation.	Systematic Literature Review	Fortes, Agostini, Wegner, Nosella, 2023
Stakeholder-resource tensions	Stakeholder and communication management tensions within the projectification context.	Systematic Literature Review	Gomes, Sousa, Tereso, 2023
Projectification tensions and implications	Identified tensions as a factor in projectification.	Systematic Literature Review, Bibliometric Review, Multi-level Analysis Review	Voros Fregolente, Neto, Ribeiro, Salerno, Nakano, de Carvalho, 2022
Public sector projectification and paradoxes	Flexibility vs. control, personal vs. organizational priorities, short-term vs. long-term orientation.	Systematic Literature Review	Jakobsen, 2022
Paradoxes in megaprojects	Stakeholder, flexibility, temporality, structure, learning, decision making, identity.	Systematic Literature Review	Wiewiora, Desouza, 2022
Performance-mission tensions	Paradoxes highlight the complex interplay between business and social logics in social enterprises.	Systematic Literature Review	Weller, Ran, 2020

Cont. table 1.

Paradoxes at the intersection of innovation and strategic management	Learning paradox, organizing paradox, performing paradox, innovation paradox.	Systematic Literature Review	Schulte, 2022
Business and NGOs' commercial cooperation	Commercial–social paradox.	Case study	Sharma, Bansal, 2017

Source: own elaboration based on narrative systematic literature reviews (2015-2025).

The results of narrative literature reviews of project management in the context of paradox theory (Wiewiora et al., 2022, p. 247), paradoxes and tensions on projectification (Fortes, Agostini, Wegner, and Nosella, 2023), and deprojectification (Jacobson et al., 2025) primarily indicate the non-linear, frequently absurd nature of paradox. A more thorough examination reveals an apparent dichotomy between financial constraints and social value, which addresses the general context of NPO project management (Buonomo et al., 2020). As Jacobsen (2022) and Fortes et al. (2023) discuss, the concepts of flexibility and control underscore the need to establish a balance between donor accountability and adaptability to community needs. The structure and flexibility paradoxes also present tension. These tensions emerge from the collision of two distinct yet interrelated project needs: the necessity to address specialized project demands and the concomitant need for organizational autonomy, a phenomenon often referred to as the structure paradox. These tensions have the potential to result in long-term imbalances and conflicts between organizational priorities and mission, on the one hand, and project objectives, on the other. These imbalances and conflicts have been previously identified in the context of the identity paradox (Wiewiora et al., 2022) and tensions between short- and long-term orientations (Jacobsen, 2022). The latter is the temporality paradox, identified by Wiewiora and Desousa (2022). Schulte (2022) initiated a discussion of the identification of paradoxical tensions and the learning paradox at the project level and beyond (Wiewiora et al., 2022).

This study sought to identify paradoxes in the findings of empirical research from Poland, comprising larger samples and employing mixed-method analysis, underscoring the validity of the gap identified at the outset of this study. In light of the findings of a quantitative study on the projectification of nonprofit organizations in Poland, which revealed notable differences in the attributes associated with this phenomenon, as perceived by organizations that engage in projectification compared to those that do not, it was decided to employ a paradoxical lens to analyze these differences.

2.2. Projectification of nonprofit sector organizations

The contemporary paradigm of nonprofit sector development is based on the process of projectification, which has transformed projects from incidental tools into the dominant mechanism for implementing organizational missions. This change, stimulated largely by European Union public policies, has made project management an operational standard

necessary for obtaining funding and ensuring the continuity of statutory activities. In the context of Polish NGOs, this systemic transformation forces organizations to constantly balance the temporary nature of project structures with the permanence of social goals. The evolution of public policies, whether promulgated by the European Union or by regional- or local-level actors, has led to a paradigm shift in which projects have ceased to be the exception and their management, by and of projects, has become a mechanism for implementing the statutory and mission activities of the nonprofit sector. A substantial number of organizations, including nonprofit entities, particularly in the European Union, operate under a project-based funding model (Jakobsen, 2022; Jacobsson et al., 2025, p. 6; Löfström, 2025; Małecka-Dobrogowska, 2025). In contemporary society, projects have emerged as a common means of achieving these objectives. There is an increasing tendency to view all aspects of life and society through a project-oriented lens. Projectification in the nonprofit sector subjects organizations to considerable pressure and a multitude of expectations. Paradoxically, this approach aligns with the well-known maxim "think globally, act locally", as articulated by Geddes (1915), which is particularly relevant to nonprofit organizations. This elucidates the paradox's inherent nature, operating under the assumption of contradictory yet simultaneously inseparable elements — a hallmark of the paradox that manifests in the collision and opposition of global and local perspectives. The notion of projectification as a prevailing management strategy for nonprofit organizations is invoked in the context of discourses concerning a projectified society or global trends in the impact of projectification on economic and social development manifested in the ever-growing share of project work (Radujković, Mišić, 2019; Schoper, Ingason, 2019; Wald, Ingason, Fridgeirsson, 2025). A review of the extant literature reveals a growing body of research on economies, societies, and specific organizations that demonstrates the social and economic dimensions of this phenomenon (Voros Fregolente et al., 2022). The aforementioned theoretical considerations regarding the nature of paradox and projectification serve as a framework for assessing the paradoxical tensions identified in a survey of nonprofit organizations in Poland. This study is part of a broader research initiative that assesses the scale of projectification and its impact, with a view to future research. A paradox lens was used to analyze the results of this assignment.

3. Methods

The present proposal is the result of a 2021-2022 survey of 385 Polish nonprofit organizations, selected through purposive sampling from a national database of non-profit organizations. The respondent profile was dominated by senior management (presidents, board members) and project coordinators, which facilitated the capture of the strategic dimension of projectification. The general objective of this study is to ascertain the extent and attributes of

projectification in the nonprofit sector. This includes the projectification rate, defined as the percentage of time spent on projects relative to total working time (Schoper, Wald, Ingason, Fridgeirsson, 2018; Wald et al., 2025). A specific component of the survey was administered to identify differences between organizations that implement projects and those that do not. The 287 qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis, yielding four clusters of meaning (content hubs). These clusters were then analyzed in response to the paradoxes identified in the extant literature. The results of a survey administered as part of the projectification research study, which sought to characterize the dichotomies identified in the proceedings of nonprofit organizations, primarily considered the mission-driven and nonprofit nature of these entities. Conversely, the findings reveal a series of contradictions and tensions inherent in the management of project-based organizations, as well as those that do not prioritize projects as a prerequisite for achieving their mission and statutory objectives. Examining projectification paradoxes led to the selection of conventions for qualitative research and to an action research based on a grounded theory approach.

The results of interpreting the data collected in the questionnaire survey from the open-ended questions—the so-called elicited texts—provided answers to both this question and the accompanying questionnaire-articulated opinions, thoughts, feelings, and evaluations. The open-ended nature of the question about differences between organizations that implement projects and those that do not in the survey questionnaire, coupled with its anonymous administration, elicited information from respondents that would not have been possible with conventional face-to-face survey methods. Among 287 valid responses from 385 respondents, it is noteworthy that they had experience with projectification and considered the open-ended questions in the quantitative survey significant. This finding aligns with assumptions about respondents' engagement, as grounded theory would predict.

The content of the evoked texts was prepared for analysis using NVivo's Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), a qualitative analysis software. A significant aspect of the analysis focused on the distinctions between organizations engaged in project-based initiatives and those that are not. A set of 385 entries was obtained for the open-ended questions. These entries were then filtered to remove missing statements, repetitive answers, "yes" or "don't know" responses, and "hard to say/difficult to determine" responses. The remaining responses (287) were consolidated into four overarching thematic clusters. These clusters were then ranked according to keywords. The technique employed for the analysis of the qualitative data obtained enabled a quantitative analysis of the content of the statements, as well as a qualitative presentation in the form of arbitrarily identified paradoxical meaning clusters.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Identity paradox in the content cluster: mission versus projectification "must-haves"

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) regard projects as integral components of their identity. Projectification, as perceived by representatives of surveyed organizations, is characterized as "an inherent feature of the nonprofit sector, supplanting missionality with managerial efficiency". This finding suggests a unification of project objectives that extends beyond the organization's scope. The phrase "projectification" as a 'must-have' alludes to the identity paradox, as indicated by the following statements by sector representatives: "An organization engaged in numerous projects tends to prioritize the objectives of these projects over the realization of its mission". It is important to note that the objectives of a project and the mission of an organization are not always aligned. An organization that places its emphasis solely on projects tends to prioritize the needs identified within those projects, thereby limiting its ability to develop and evolve. These objectives are short-term and do not facilitate growth. This reveals the main paradoxical tension. The primacy of the projectification approach is further substantiated by the following statement: "I think every activity in an organization is a project. Those who are unaware of this fact operate under different systems, the nature of which remains unclear". It is evident that there is congruence between "the organizational mission and the objectives of the project, as indicated by the presence of an equal sign between these two elements." The magnitude and consequence of projectification in NPOs are articulated by one respondent's rhetorical inquiry: 'Are there still organizations that do not project their activities?' The present moment is characterized by the absence of NGOs that do not engage in project implementation to some extent. This phenomenon can be attributed to the "inherent nature of NGOs, which is predicated on the execution of projects as a fundamental element of their mission". In the opinion of NPOs responding to the survey, it is noteworthy that "no organization exists that does not engage in project implementation". The placement of the project above the organization's mission directly reveals the contradiction at the heart of this paradox. "Project thinking is at the heart of community functioning, and the utilization of external programs and funding is a natural occurrence". As indicated in the sector's official statements, "an organization that is implementing projects must adapt its goals, financing policy, and type of activities to the requirements of the project". An unanswered issue is the comment made by one respondent: "An organization that does not implement projects is an organization doomed to self-destruction. It is only a matter of time".

In light of these statements, nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are compelled to strike a balance between their core mission and the constraints and opportunities presented by project-based management and funding. This phenomenon directly alludes to the identity paradox (Wiewiora et al., 2022, p. 248), which delineates the contradiction between a project and its

organizational identity. Indeed, this paradox frequently manifests as the integration of project identity and value identity behaviors aligned with the social mission of nonprofit organizations (Wiewiora et al., 2022, p. 248; Fortes et al., 2023). This paradox, predicated on the organization's mission and essential projects, can be extrapolated to reveal interorganizational and even sector-wide relationships. The aforementioned dichotomy manifests as a contradiction between project objectives and the organization's mission objectives, as well as the inherently mission-driven nature of the nonprofit sector. The identification paradox underscores robust project identity within the previously referenced content cluster, encompassing the relinquishment of organizational identity. This paradox identifies numerous tensions within the projectified organization (Voros Fregolente et al., 2022), manifesting as levels of chaos or conflicts of interest. Furthermore, the statements made by representatives of the Polish nonprofit sector, as identified within the content cluster, allude to the intricacies of the identification paradox. This paradox, as posited by Sharma and Bansal (2017), underscores a dichotomy in which nonprofit entities must choose between aligning their identified local needs with those of an external donor or prioritizing their sector's mission activities over commercial objectives. The clustering of statements from Polish nonprofits also alludes to the identity paradox through mismatches and tensions between project goals and the organization's mission. According to the participants' statements, confirmed by Wiewiora and Desoyuza, it is "a conscious action in favor of the project, the project goals, while neglecting the strategic organizational directions and even abandoning the priority of organizational capacity-building opportunities" (Wiewiora et al., 2022, p. 244). The identity paradox in the nonprofit sector is a well-documented dilemma between mission and project priority. This analysis focused on a subset of statements from the projectification scenario prioritized over the organization's mission. This results in projectification becoming an integral part of the organization's identity and is a key source of financial stability

4.2. Temporality paradox in content cluster: The project's short-term funding vs. long-term management and engagement

The proposed cluster of statements below refers to the temporality paradox identified in the literature, in which project funding cycles focus on short-term deliverables that may conflict with long-term social impact goals (Wiewiora et al., 2022, pp. 242, 248). The temporality paradox has been identified as a phenomenon that highlights the dichotomy between short-term and long-term focus in relationships (Jakobsen, 2022). From the perspective of nonprofit representatives, the paradoxical differences between projectified and non-projectified actors in the nonprofit sector can be summarized in three concepts: "operating from time to time without projects", "actionary", and "with projects - continuity of support and funding". This aspect is also noted in the development opportunities of the organizations, concerning differences between project-based organizations in the employment of the team, as expressed in the following opinion: "The distinction and tension lie in the assumption of employment and the

subsequent generation of revenue". This is further compounded by factors such as "the extent of operational activity, income generation, and the capacity to employ personnel". The projectified NPO establishes "a permanent team, accompanied by the assurance of a stable budget, further enhancing the organization's stability". The paradoxically "apparent" stability of the project organization's functioning is indirectly reflected in statements about the "constancy" of the project teams. This assertion has been reiterated on multiple occasions when comparing project-based and non-project-based organizations. It has been demonstrated that "projects can employ staff for which there is no funding outside of the project". Furthermore, "projects offer greater stability and certainty of continuity of employment in a project position, as well as stability of funding during its realization". In contrast, when querying the distinctions between projectified and non-projectified nonprofits, organizations observe tensions concerning a mechanism to diversify their funding sources and undertake proper activities: "Stabilization. It is imperative to acknowledge that projects do not inherently ensure stability. The entity responsible for project implementation functions in a project-oriented manner", that is to say, "in the absence of a project, there is no operational capacity"; "the entity that implements projects frequently benefits from public funding, while the entity that does not implement projects predominantly engages in business or operates on a share-based, often voluntary basis"; and "entities that do not implement projects are more likely to offer paid services to beneficiaries." An organization's strategic orientation is "a business-oriented focus, concentrating on individuals who are at risk of exclusion. (...) Projects are only for a while, and economic activities are permanent".

The tension between the two approaches was considered in the context of the results of this study on nonprofit organizations. The first focuses on short-term or immediate project objectives, whereas the second focuses on long-term project outcomes and future preparation. This tension was noted by Wiewiora and Desouza as a temporality paradox (2022, p. 242). Furthermore, Samset and Volden emphasize the necessity of distinguishing between "tactical performance, which is the question of delivering the project outputs as planned, and strategic performance, which is the worth or utility of the project as seen in a long-term perspective" (2016, p. 300). In both projectified and non-projectified organizations, the necessity to achieve performance emerges, potentially manifesting at the level of "immediate" project goals. This performance often contrasts with the long-term assessment of the vision and mission of nonprofit organizations. Considering this background, the identified responses revealed the paradoxical temporary nature of this group. Non-projectified organizations are often perceived as indicative of stagnation and a lack of challenges. These factors are associated with project objectives, organizational structure, and the implementation and financing of project activities and teams. In this collection of contributions, it is also noteworthy to highlight the paradox of short-term funding, which, in the case of nonprofit organizations, is still paradoxically synonymous with financial stability. By nature, projects require short-term funding. However, the paradox involves creating short-term project forms that are limited by resources, time,

and budgets. These forms are then multiplied and converted into a permanent form of activity for project organizations. Concurrently, the responses obtained from this group demonstrate that the temporality paradox manifests in instances of excessive projectification. According to the surveyed NPOs, this phenomenon can manifest as a deviation from their mission and autonomy, thereby highlighting the contradiction and tension between short-term project goals, precarious employment, and the organization's long-term mission.

4.3. Flexibility and structure paradox in the content cluster: standards versus flexibility and operational independence

Paradoxes arise in content clusters when standards, flexibility, and operational independence are considered. Organizations that implement projects from the perspective of survey participants are distinguished by their possession of both a clearly defined objective and a meticulously formulated action plan to accompany these goals. Those who do not implement projects "focus on the mission, and the payoff is satisfaction." An organization that implements projects is distinguished by its "effectiveness in achieving its goals, expanding the organization's group of beneficiaries", stability, "horizon for achieving goals, and "management style". An organization that implements projects is distinguished by "faster achievement of planned goals, greater dynamism and diversity, and more frequent rotation (variable project teams)". According to the respondents, "project-based team management is employed in such organizations". Operating within a "black box structure" means that "all individuals are capable of delegating tasks according to their function in the project, irrespective of their function in the organization". Those who undertake project implementation "must demonstrate determination and a willingness to make personal sacrifices in terms of their time". The most salient paradoxical tensions arise from the tension between structured frameworks and flexibility. Based on the assumption that project implementation demands structured frameworks, while NGOs often require operational flexibility, the third identified cluster concerns the flexibility paradox (DeFillippi, Sydow, 2016; Wiewiora et al., 2022) and relates to the structure paradox described by Desouza (2022). According to the respondents, the projectified nonprofit organization exhibits characteristics of a "black box", a kind of recorder that acts purposefully and works in teams, following structurally embodied procedures resulting from the project and project management. The respondents' positions were that non-project organizations were contradictory. The respondents assert that these organizations are the only ones capable of operating in a mission-oriented, ideological, and organizationally flexible manner, underpinned by operational flexibility. Standardization, which binds the described projectification of the nonprofit sector, is part of the structural paradox. Organizations are distinguished by an identified goal and a plan of action, in accordance with established practices and strict procedures. The absence of funding and project implementation is characterized by openness and a lack of formal constraints. This state of opposition and paradoxical tension is at odds with conventional structures and processes associated with

project implementation and funding. Organizations that do not subscribe to the projectification scenario and instead operate without external support prioritize fulfilling their mission, deriving satisfaction from the process's focus on it, and the payoff is satisfaction. The identified standardization versus flexibility and ideational independence are relevant to the flexibility and structure paradox, which confirms two of the following contradictions: (1) flexibility versus control and (2) flexibility versus standardization (Wiewiora et al., 2022, p. 241). Concurrently, the tension between the imperative for the adaptable execution of social and mission-oriented initiatives and the standardization inherent in project-based management gives rise to the paradox identified by Fortes et al. (2023). This paradox underscores the inherent contradiction between flexibility and rigidity in organizational frameworks. As posited by Wiewiora and Desouza (2022), contradictory elements (paradoxical constructs) must coexist in order to address distinct challenges.

4.4. Learning paradox in content cluster: development through projects as opposed to routine and patterns

The fourth point concerns a paradox in learning and knowledge creation: the tension between project-based development and adherence to routine or established everyday patterns. NGOs need autonomy to create, but they must also adhere to donor-driven accountability measures, overshadowing grassroots and participatory approaches. The implementation of projects has been demonstrated to foster action, offer organizations the opportunity for self-realization and innovation, and employ creative approaches to achieving development goals. According to respondents, organizations that implement projects choose "development opportunities (institutional as well as human resources)" using external projects and funds". It fosters personal growth, strengthens resilience, and challenges participants to achieve defined objectives". "The organization implementing the projects is focused on development". An NPO with the project scenario is seen as "A broader perspective, new experiences, obtaining financial resources, building coalitions, and partnerships". Projectification means the creation of "interesting products of the organization that can be further developed, access to new knowledge and experience of project partners, and involvement of organization members in projects". Further differences identified by survey respondents include "development potential", "develops", and "implementing projects according to a plan", which improve the quality of work and facilitate it, unlike non-project work. "An organization implementing projects is generally more dynamic, flexible, ready for change, and thus more innovative than an organization that operates on an operational basis". Implementing projects means "specialized management and employees having more developed soft and hard skills". Employees working on projects in the organization are "more creative and versatile". Projectified NPO has "a richer and more interesting offer for its customers and can develop in many respects". On the other hand, respondents are conscious that "project-based organizations incur significant costs in the form of excessive bureaucracy, formalization,

and dehumanization". The implementation of projects is also associated with the negative consequences of control and the need to adapt the organization to the requirements of the external donor. The achievement of project objectives is also contingent upon "top-down supervision", a method of exercising control over the organization that may not be universally accepted, given the ideological independence of certain organizations. These constraints create tensions manifest "in the professionalization of project-based organizations, leading to the imposition of a 'iron cage' that restricts the realization of organizational goals in favor of project goals, as perceived by donors". Conversely, organizations that do not engage in projectification may opt for alternative scenarios for their development, which frequently results in "organizational and staff stagnation since the missionary and less formal character of NPO". According to the respondents, "organizations that do not implement projects are either content operating on public tasks, or they do not set themselves significant challenges". In such cases, "the voluntary work of the members or volunteers must be sufficient". Those who do not implement projects are "more stagnant in the reality surrounding the organization." The absence of projects within an organization can result in a limited number of opportunities for self-realization, innovation, and creativity. This segment of the discourse, which pertains to the comparative analysis of organizations that have implemented projects and those that have not initiated projects, can be encapsulated by the following statement, which was made by a representative of one of the organizations: "In my opinion, an organization implementing projects is characterized by a higher level of professionalization as opposed to the one described. Thanks to projects "NPOs have improved their competences in organizational management", and "realizing projects brings 'life' into the organization—it builds commitment and identification with the organization". Moreover, "working in a project-based organization is geared towards the development of the organization, to develop cooperation with the local environment and respond to its needs, and to allow the organization to be promoted. The implementation of projects provides an opportunity to develop the organization's knowledge and integrate an expert approach or grassroots approach to the social environment's needs".

The transformation of an organization into a project-oriented entity is accompanied by its metamorphosis into an expert organization, a process that generates novel knowledge (Bakker, Cambré, Korlaar, Raab, 2011). Two accounts of this paradox can be found in the literature. The first account compares learning with performance, and the second compares exploration with exploitation (Wiewiora et al., 2022; Andriopoulos, Lewis, 2009). As posited by Bakker et al. (2011) and subsequently referenced by Wiewiora-Desouza (2022), the dichotomy between learning and performance encapsulates the discordances inherent in the generation, dissemination, and utilization of knowledge within and beyond the project's confines. This paradox is also related to project experiences, including their formalization, which spreads in projectified institutions beyond the formal project structure. In the context of the learning paradox, Wiewiora and Desouza (2022) emphasized the financial cost of learning, which

requires allocating time and resources. They also discuss the tension arising from nonprofit organizations' tendency to prioritize project delivery over local community engagement. This tension can result in the “expert” decision to either block underdeveloped, grassroots solutions that are locally satisfying or to promote learning and the expertise of solutions, potentially leading to delays and budget overruns in project delivery. Furthermore, according to Wiewiora and Desouza, the exploration versus exploitation aspect of this paradox is ‘the tension between creating new opportunities to exploit emerging opportunities and reusing existing capabilities and routines to deal with stable and predictable aspects of the project’ (Wiewiora et al., 2022, p. 243), which remains a dilemma for further research.

5. Conclusions

The phenomenon of projectification, which has intensified in the Polish nonprofit sector over the past three decades of evolution, following Poland's accession to the European Union, reveals several tensions and paradoxes. Projectification not only redefines management practices but also changes how the mission is carried out, affects the structure of employment, and influences relationships with stakeholders. Identifying and analyzing paradoxes in organizations' project activities is an attempt to answer questions about the long-term consequences of these activities and their compatibility with the idea of sustainable social development. The phenomenon of projectification in nonprofit organizations, especially in the Polish context, is an important field of research that reveals deep and multidimensional tensions between project logic and organizational missions. This study confirms the existence of structural paradoxes that manifest in four areas: identity, temporality, flexibility versus structure, and the learning paradox tension between autonomy and dependence. These theoretical implications arise from applying paradox theory as an analytical framework for studying organizational tensions. Paradoxes such as the identification paradox (conflict between mission and project logic), temporariness (instability resulting from short-term funding sources and permanent functioning of the organization based on temporary structures), learning, flexibility, and structural paradox (dependence on external donors despite apparent autonomy) are inherent elements of project-based NPOs' functioning. Their presence indicates the need to integrate project management research with organizational and social reflections.

The main conclusions of this study confirm the relevance of the paradox theory in the analysis of project management in the nonprofit sector. Projectification appears not only as a management tool but also as a social and cultural phenomenon that can redefine relationships within organizations and their connections to their environments. This requires new reflection on strategic management models that consider the tension between the temporary nature of project activities and the need for continuity and consistency in missions. These practical

implications suggest the need to implement remedial strategies that support tension management rather than its elimination. Such strategies include: (1) evaluating projects not only in terms of effectiveness but also in terms of their compatibility with the organization's mission; (2) diversifying funding sources, including integrating projects with paid activities and fundraising; (3) building stable employment structures around the core team; and (4) ensuring inter-project space for reflection and strengthening relationships with the environment. Projects should be a means, not an end in themselves—an instrument supporting the mission — and should not be replaced. They should include the need to implement mechanisms for monitoring project compliance with the organization's mission. Organizations should strive to diversify their funding sources and activities to reduce their dependence on public projects. Professionalization of staff should be supported by stable, core employment rather than project-based employment. It is also necessary to plan for “inter-project space” as a moment for reflection and relationship building with stakeholders.

The limitations of the study stem from the subjective nature of the data. The analysis is based on subjective elicited texts and respondents' opinions and emotions, and the conclusions are based on statements made by representatives of the organizations. This may limit the possibility of generalizing the results. Therefore, data triangulation and in-depth qualitative research are necessary. The homogeneity of the empirical sources and the subjective nature of respondents' statements also pose limitations. The participants were mainly representatives of organizations actively implementing projects, which may have influenced their perceptions of the phenomenon and limited the representativeness of the sample. There is also a lack of comparative data from organizations that have not implemented the project model, which makes it difficult to fully capture structural and cultural differences. A further limitation of this study is that it does not include financial data, such as revenues and employment forms, for individual organizations. This limits the possibility of substantiating the theses quantitatively on the scale of instability in project organizations.

Further research should focus on (1) an in-depth analysis of the impact of projectification on the quality of the relations between beneficiaries and the local community, (2) an evaluation of the effectiveness of paradox management strategies in the long term, and (3) cross-sectoral and cross-cultural comparisons. It is recommended that future research endeavours incorporate a qualitative perspective alongside an economic analysis of nonprofit sector entities. It is also worth exploring the potential of deprojectification as a conscious organizational choice and identifying the conditions under which projectification ceases to be an effective development tool. In addition, they should focus on analyzing the long-term effects of projectification, the diversity of NPO adaptation strategies, and international comparisons. It is also important to empirically test the effectiveness of recommended paradox management strategies.

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