Projectified Politics – Temporary Organisations in a Public Context
Introduction to the special issue
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Introduction

The 'project' as an organisational ideal type has become a symbol for the acceleration of social problem solving and intervention. Within some policy fields, for instance European regional development policy, the project organization is the prime component for policy implementation. Some voices have argued that the project as such has become a post-bureaucratic symbol of adaptability and contingency considered to be a superior way of reacting to unanticipated and irregular situations (Heckscher & Donollon, 1994; Lundin & Söderholm, 1995; Clegg & Courpasson, 2004; Sjöblom, 2009). However, not only projects, but many other novel forms of organising public policy demonstrate this temporality. Policy programs, networks, partnerships, local action groups, and contractual forms of cooperation operate within (more or less limited) time frames. Consequently, politics is becoming increasingly 'projectified'. Thus projectification, stands for a fundamental development towards just-in-time planning and execution. Based on a hyper-rational interpretation, temporary organisations constitute vehicles for flexible, fast and innovative problem solving and intervention. Simultaneously, they challenge the need for policy continuity and sustainability in a way that gives every reason to emphasize the temporal dimension of current organisational solutions, in empirical as well as theoretical respects.

Empirically speaking there are functional, political, as well as symbolic drivers behind the proliferation of project organisations in the public sphere (cf. Jensen et al., 2013). In a functional sense projectification is largely a consequence of the imperative for strategic change that has characterised public sector reform policies in recent decades. Temporary organizations, particularly projects, are expected to offer more flexible and efficient alternatives to the traditional bureaucratic forms of organising the public sector. Many reforms and policies are launched by means of time-limited legislation and funding. Projects are to an increasing extent the organising form for development work, cross-agency arrangements and joint actions in and between permanent organisations. They are e.g. major instruments for implementing the structural fund policies of the European Union. As a concept project management corresponds extremely well to the quest for flexibility and effectiveness of the New Public Management paradigm. In more general terms it is evident that the changes in the aftermath of NPM have had considerable bearing on the ways in which time-frames are constructed in public policies (cf. Pollitt, 2008; Abrahamsson & Agevall, 2010: 37 ff.).

Projects are expected to accelerate the decision-making processes and increase the problem-solving capabilities of the executive systems. They manifest intentions and ambitions, and provide means of organising vested interests, stakeholders and expertise on a just-in-time basis. They are promises for non-bureaucratic forms of organising bureaucratic entities. Consequently, 'the pro-

ject' is a symbol not only for stepping up processes, but also for innovation, decisiveness and entrepreneurship (Sahlin-Andersson, 2002; Jensen et al., 2013). Even if the aforementioned expressions of projectification can be found in most countries, there are of course considerable variations between policy fields and jurisdictions. Although the development has attracted a massive interest from researchers in organisational behaviour and business studies as well as practitioners, the phenomenon as such is still, in a systematic sense, notably overlooked among researchers of governance systems and public sector organisations.

Theoretical challenges

This still rather fragmented interest in projectification becomes a shortcoming particularly as the phenomenon theoretically draws the attention to the temporal dimension of current governance systems. Many of the global challenges facing societies such as climate change, technological evolution and financial fluctuations increase the speed and number of interactions between elements in the global system. Time scales are compressed and processes become increasingly non-linear and unpredictable (Duit & Galaz, 2008: 311). The magnitude of such processes has been acknowledged by many scholars in the field of governance research (Pierre & Peters, 2000; Young et al., 2006; Duit & Galaz, 2008; Laux, 2011, Dussauge-Laguna 2012). The compression of temporal scales is, however, mainly treated as just one out of many dimensions of complexity that challenge the adaptive capabilities of the governance systems. There is a shortage of methodical analyses of the inherent temporal features of current organisational forms. Given the magnitude of the proliferation of project management, crucial questions are; how do permanent and temporary organisations interact in bureaucratic contexts, and to what extent can long-term outcomes be achieved by means of temporary organisations and short-term policy interventions?

Basically we agree with the frequently repeated assertion that there is a need to shift focus from examining macrostructures, and general patterns of governance, to analysing the problem-solving capacity of micro- and meso-structures (Duit & Galaz, 2008: 329; Schneider, 2012: 140). Our basic premise is that analyses of projectification, as an expression of essential changes in the temporal logic of public decision-making, may contribute to a better understanding of several key issues of the governance approach; particularly interpretations of complexity, conditions for stability and change, prerequisites for capturing and sustaining knowledge and, finally, the possibilities for institutionalising new governance arrangements. These themes, several of which are addressed by the contributions to this special issue, are briefly outlined in the following.

Structural complexity and temporal differentiation

The complexity facing modern societies has become one of the most common points of reference when interpreting societal change (cf. Dennis, 2007; Schneider, 2012). In a governance context complexity is usually understood as reduced

capabilities for steering and control due to increasing national and supranational dependencies, but also an erosion of a 'collective will' and the differentiation of societal demands and interests. Such interpretations emphasize complexity in a structural sense.

However, adaptation in complex governance systems is not only a matter of relationships between differentiated organisational forms representing different logics. It is also a question of managing increasingly differentiated and competing time frames. On the one hand we are witnessing a tendency for policies to become increasingly time-framed and projectified in terms of interventions and choice of policy instruments. On the other hand there is, for instance in policy fields like environmental management, health policy and regional development, a concurrent demand for long-term, sometimes generational time perspectives, in terms of outcomes (cf. Marsden et al., 2012).

As the temporal logic of the parliamentary processes essentially have remained unchanged, the consequence of the changes described above, some scholars have argued, is a massive desynchronisation between the pace of political decisions and that of social evolution (Laux, 2011: 232 f.). Despite increasing interests among sociologists (cf. Adam et al., 2002; Voss et al., 2009; Laux, 2001), very limited attention has so far been devoted to the societal causes and consequences of temporal differentiation. The same goes for the temporal characteristics of organisations and policy instruments; research on these issues has mainly been confined to business and management studies (e.g. Lundin & Söderholm, 1995; Adam et al., 2002).

The perhaps most obvious consequence of the fact that the temporal dimension increasingly affects the outcome of societal activities is that actors face the problem of concurrently answering to demands for quick reactions while at the same time securing long-term policy design and consequentiality. This tension has been described as a dilemma of short-term contextuality and long-term guidance (Voss et al., 2009: 281). Current governance arrangements have inherent temporal features that are significantly more pronounced than before and actors have to balance short-term policy cycles with overarching policy-making processes, as shown by Anna Krohwinkel-Karlsson in her article in this special issue. Thus, there is an apparent need to define organisational relationships, not only in terms of structural features, but also as a relationship in time (cf. Noss, 2002: 48).

Stability and change

A limitation shared by many temporal approaches to public management is the difficulty to identify and explain mechanisms that promote stability and change. In analyses of public policymaking the temporal dimension, if present at all, is usually a matter of history; of governing with the past (Pierson, 2000; Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Pollitt, 2008). Projectified policies enable a temporal approach to mechanisms of the political system that are particularly vital in terms of stability and change, such as mechanisms for co-ordination and control.

According to the conventional understanding of politics it is the central government's task to maintain coordination and to impose a public interest on non-state actors. This capacity is challenged by much political advancement as witnessed in most modern reform programs in Western industrialised countries. A frequent argument has been that the policies for modernising public administration and management, especially the NPM-oriented reform programs, have undermined the possibilities for political leadership and political control (e.g. Christensen et al., 2008). Still, it is by no means clear what kind of effects projectification will have with respect to the coordinative capacity of the central government. On the one hand autonomous organisations in high velocity environments may react instantaneously for maximizing immediate effects (Hedaa & Törnroos, 2002: 36 f.) in ways that undermine every effort of coordination and control. On the other hand, the actions of the State still represent a considerable fear of the inability to guarantee the rationality of political decisions (cf. Laux, 2011: 227). The state reacts to dynamic forces by striving towards stability. Several of the articles in this special issue emphasize, although from very different angles, stability rather than change.

Rebecka Forssell, Mats Fred and Patrik Hall argue that a relative stability emerge from the confrontation between different logics that is pertinent to projectified public contexts. In her analysis of ICT-projects Gabriella Jansson shows that the integration of projects in long-term strategies, at least in highly specialised fields, is essential in order to avoid isolation and technological capture. In her article on urban participatory projects in Finland Kanerva Kuokkanen concludes that local politicians are willing to provide new opportunities for participation and deliberation, but reluctant to increase direct external influence on decision-making processes. Regardless of empirical focus the articles indicate that the presence of politics and the integration of projects into the overarching policies are crucial factors for explaining project success.

Capturing knowledge

That being said, to what extent does the reality correspond to ideal conceptions of temporary organisations provided by the project management literature? According to such ideals 'the project' is usually regarded as a superior way of reacting to unforeseen and irregular situations. They are tools for achieving change and for reducing complexity in situations where setting goals is difficult (Sahlin-Andersson & Söderholm, 2002; Jensen et al., 2013). Some authors have reconceptualised projects as a temporary knowledge organizations, meaning that projects are expected to focus on generating new knowledge in order to solve multi-causal problems (Sbarcea & Martins, 2003). In terms of knowledge, such conceptualisations of a project organisation appear to be based on three assumptions. Firstly, that project management (and the managers) represents a specific type of transferrable skills which can be smoothly adopted in unpredictable and complex decisional situations. Secondly, the assumption that the projects are tools for facilitating learning and knowledge exchange in complex and cross-

sectorial organisational settings. Thirdly, the idea that permanent organisations are able to capture and sustain knowledge gained by means of project organisations. All these three assumptions are, at least to some extent, questioned by the contributions in this special issue.

Focusing on recruitment processes in Danish civil service Birgitte Poulsen and Karl Löfgren conclude that although project management has permeated throughout the central service it has done so mainly in the sense that the term is used inequitably for describing all the different features of modern work-life in contemporary bureaucracies. Furthermore, project management is not employed for cross-sectorial policy problems; rather it is a way of organising public authorities internally. The results of Sebastian Godenhjelm's meta-evaluation of EU fisheries policy demonstrates that the employed evaluation criteria are mainly focused on outputs, rather than the long-term outcomes, and furthermore, that the effects of projects *per se* rarely are assessed. The connection between the evaluation system and the project management logic remains weak and the potential added value that organising by projects could produce remains unutilised.

Regarding the possibilities of achieving long-term goals by means of short-term interventions and instruments, standardised evaluation procedures so far seem to give only limited guidance. Policy objectives and processes are as a rule not sufficiently operationalized in terms of time and sequence, which makes it hard to assess one of the most important strengths attached to projectified structures, namely their ability to capture and transfer information and knowledge.

Institutionalised temporary structures?

The governance approach emphasises well-institutionalised structures as a prerequisite for cooperation and flexible adjustment in public governance (Torfing et al., 2012: 104 ff.). From a temporal point of view institutionalisation reflects above all the delicate balance between over-institutionalisation in order to secure coherence and synchronised activities on the one hand and, on the other hand, a high degree of autonomy for pursuing experimental, innovative and decisive actions.

Over-institutionalisation and strong structural dependencies might reduce the flexible, innovative and integrative capacities that are usually associated with temporary organisations and long-term policy design. Meanwhile, a high degree of autonomy makes organisations and instruments operating in a short-term context extremely vulnerable to asymmetric power relations and hard to integrate into frameworks for democratic institutions (Voss et al., 2009: 287). Responsibilities and policies are increasingly fragmented and desynchronised. Accountability becomes a highly situational relationship based on the nature of the actor, or the conduct, rather than the democratic nature of the obligation (cf. Bovens, 2007: 461).

It would be farfetched to interpret the findings presented in the articles of this special issue in terms of fragmentation and desynchronisation. The main impression is the one of permanent institutions maintaining control to an extent

that it can be questioned whether temporary forms of organising really provide alternative avenues for public policy making, at least in highly decentralised systems such as the Nordic ones. Projectified structures are, however, contextually sensitive. The causes and consequences of projectification vary considerably between policy fields, administrative levels and, not the least, between administrative traditions (Andersson et al., 2012). Thus, there is an evident need for further research on the temporal dimension of current governance systems on a comparative basis.

The articles

In her article *Politicized projects: Schedule modification as a tool for coordination between temporary interventions and long-term policies at an aid agency* Anna Krohwinkel-Karlsson departs from the hypothesis that the priority of a project in relation to the longer-term goals and strategies of a multi-project organisation is crucial for understanding project-outcomes. Using a rich data set from the Swedish overseas development aid agency SIDA, she analyses how project extension and rescheduling were justified and valued within the agency. The results show that SIDA was more likely to extend projects that enjoyed a high priority status within its portfolio and that were based on recurrent engagement with certain contractual partners. The need to harmonise project cycles with overarching policy-making processes was a recurrent reason for SIDA to adjust project scheduling and for actively engaging in project design. The conclusion is that project schedule modification can be described as a tool for coordination between the portfolio of time-limited commitments, and the permanent structures of the agency.

Departing from a meta-evaluation of development projects in the city of Malmö, Sweden Rebecka Forssell, Mats Fred and Patrik Hall analyse projects as means for promoting stability and change. Projects are here conceptualised as relatively stable collections, or assemblies, of non-permanent activities. The relative stability emerges from a confrontation between different logics; a system logic primarily directed by the funding principles and interests of external financers; a political logic based on the inclination to demonstrate change, innovation and cooperation; and finally an organisational logic based on predictability, thus usually rejecting temporary forms of organising. The results show that the stabilising organisational logic usually overruns the change-oriented logic. Consequently, the achievements of projects are rarely transferred to and implemented by the permanent municipal organisation; rather they tend to give rise to new projects. Thus projects as an organisational form provide a standardised solution for coping with the contradictory demands for cross-sectorial capacities and the quest for predictable and well-structured activities.

In their article *Project management in the Danish Central Government* Karl Löfgren and Birgitte Poulsen analyse how the individual roles related to project management has evolved over time in the Danish Civil service. The article is based on an analysis of public recruitment efforts in civil service organisations

from 1982 until 2011. The results contradict several conventional expectations related to public sector project management. By requesting project management competence the Danish civil service have been looking for certain interpersonal skills rather than transferable Project Management competencies. Moreover, project management is not employed for cross-sectorial policy problems. Rather it is conceived as a way of organising the office internally. Project management has permeated throughout the central service but mainly in the sense that the term is used inequitably for describing all forms of work-life in modern bureaucracies.

In his article *Project impact in a multi-level context: The case of the European Fisheries Fund Evaluation in Finland* Sebastian Godenhjelm addresses the impact problem related to project organisations, i.e. are project evaluations conducted in such a way that long-term effects can be assessed, and to what extent do evaluations measure the added value of projects as an organisational form? The results of a meta-evaluation of EU fisheries policy show that the evaluation criteria are focused on output rather than outcomes, and that the effects of projects as a policy tool rarely are assessed. Thus the results indicate that the evaluation approach, based on highly standardised and quantitative evaluation criteria, is insufficient insofar as it captures the achievements and the added value of the projects only to a limited extent. The connection between the evaluation system and the project management logic remains weak.

The focus of Gabriella Jansson's article is the role of local government politicians within the field of eGovernance. By studying the implementation of eGovernance in two divergent Swedish municipalities she shows that projects in fields such as technologically mediated practices may run a dual risk of 'technological capture'. Both technological development and project management are domains traditionally dominated by bureaucrats and professionalised expertise. If solutions related to eGovernance are perceived mainly as technocratic and apolitical issues by the politicians, eGovernance projects become isolated efforts and non-issues in terms of political steering and control. However, if the projects are integrated in the long-term policy strategies, and gain a political interest that goes beyond strategic policy formulation and initiation, the possibilities for reaching long-term effects by means of project organisations increase.

The article by Kanerva Kuokkanen *Assessing the Democratic Qualities of Programmes and Projects: A case from Finnish Urban Policy* presents an analysis of the democratic qualities of participatory projects in urban governance. To what extent do such projects provide new forms of participation and deliberation, and how are they related to the permanent political and administrative institutions? Her results show that the program level provided means for dialogue between the municipalities, although that dialogue mainly concerned a limited number of officials in the municipalities. The project level facilitated flexible means for participation and mobilisation of local actors but no instruments for long-term integration of the projects in the permanent administrative structure. The results indicate that local decision-makers are willing to provide opportuni-

ties for participation and deliberation, but reluctant to increasing the direct external influence on decision-making processes.

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