

Call for Papers: Beyond traditional project management: the role of projects and programs in responding to societal and humanitarian issues

Background

There is an increasing demand from projects and programs in the past decade to address society's urgent needs arising from multiple crises due to persistent armed conflicts and the climate crisis.

The United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in its Global Humanitarian overview predicts that more than 300 million people will need humanitarian assistance globally (OCHA, 2025). The year 2025 saw major conflicts such as Ukraine in Europe, Gaza in the Middle East, Sudan and elsewhere in Africa [1]. As a result, more than 124 million people were displaced or suffered violence. At the same time, the climate crisis [2] is affecting the lives and livelihoods of more than 93 million people. This is causing food insecurity due to weather changes such as droughts, floods and cyclones that will result in hunger. The United Nations (UN) and its partner organizations are appealing for over \$47 billion to assist over 190 million people across 72 countries (OCHA, 2025). Indeed, the World Economic Forum (WEF) predicts the increased risk of "polycrisis," "where disparate crises interact such that the overall impact exceeds the sum of each part" (Torkington, 2023; Lawrence *et al.*, 2024). The WEF is also raising the prospect of stagflation, a period of slow growth accompanied by rising inflation causing harm to middle- and low-growth economies. The WEF also predicts that 85 million jobs could be lost due to advances in artificial intelligence in 2025.

The International Organization of Migration's impact report estimates that 117 million people worldwide face a displacement crisis due to conflicts and natural disasters (IOM, 2024). Projects and programs will be expected to play a transformative role to keep pace with these societal concerns.

Such a transformative role will require us to think critically about specific issues in our disciplines such as purposeful leadership and personal responsibility (Whyte *et al.*, 2022; Konstantinou, 2025), project organizing (Krause, 2014), building resilience (Naderpajouh *et al.*, 2023) and digital transformation (Brown *et al.*, 2022).

The focus of this call for papers is how projects respond to these challenging issues in turbulent times. Papers submitted to this special issue will address the role played by projects and programs to address these societal and humanitarian concerns would include but not be limited to the following:

- (1) Transformative and collaborative leadership approaches are needed to lead humanitarian projects (Bollettino *et al.*, 2019; Ramalingam and Mitchell, 2023; Timmins and Hallwright, 2024);
- (2) Governance strategies to address unethical practices highlighted by the literature on dark side of projects (Locatelli *et al.*, 2022a, b);
- (3) Project studies at societal level focusing on human emancipation (Gerald and Söderlund, 2018);
- (4) Advancing the understanding of ecological–societal transformations through resilient projects (Piperca and Floricel, 2023)?



Project studies provide an intellectual framework affording a common home for the different disciplinary, inter disciplinary and transdisciplinary, projects addressing societal and humanitarian issues globally. We therefore request the global community of project management scholars to help to meet these challenges by providing theorized empirical case studies of projects oriented to societal and humanitarian concerns caused by conflicts, climate change, dislocations, forced repatriations and the impact of artificial intelligence on employment. We expect articles that

- (1) Are theoretically well developed;
- (2) Include implications for practice;
- (3) Are original contributions to the corpus of project studies;
- (4) Are inter disciplinary and transdisciplinary in scope.

Aim and scope of the special issue

This special issue invites researchers to investigate projects focused on addressing challenges faced due to societal and humanitarian concerns. The research reported would potentially cover how projects and programs were conceived, developed and implemented and how they are organized and delivered to contribute to addressing such concerns.

Researchers who are engaged in projects and programs under the scope of this special issue could potentially use novel methods for project management researchers. These could include but are not limited to

- (1) Participatory research methods such as participatory action research (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014; Greenwood and Levin, 2006) and other participatory approaches such as modeling (e.g. Hossain *et al.*, 2020) and ethnoventionist research (van Marrewijk *et al.*, 2010);
- (2) Storytelling and narrative research (Clandinin and Connelly, 1989; van Marrewijk *et al.*, 2023) to gather data from vulnerable parts of the society (Iseke, 2013);
- (3) Causal layered analysis (Inayatullah, 2009) to explore organizational and societal transformation in futures research;
- (4) Exploratory research to unearth global and innovative sustainable practices in projects and communities (Larsson and Larsson, 2018; Molina-Maturano *et al.*, 2020);
- (5) Social network methods to address cooperation tensions in project ecologies (Naderpajouh *et al.*, 2024).

The methods used to manage these challenging projects and programs may be developed specifically to meet stakeholder needs to address societal and humanitarian concerns (Rossignoli *et al.*, 2017). Thus, the methods may be locally contextual and situated in specific practices rather than grounded in theory. The success criteria for these types of projects and programs may be centered explicitly on purpose and value rather than cost. Timeliness and quality from the immediate stakeholders' point of view will be specifically important (Clegg *et al.*, 2021, 2024). We expect that this will lead authors to include new theoretical implications from the research being reported. Potential theories that could be relevant include but are not limited to

- (1) Realist social theory (Archer, 1995) and morphogenic sequencing to transformations and contributions to social policy (Carter and New, 2005);
- (2) Socio-cognitive theory (Bandura, 2011), which considers dynamic interactions between people, their behavior and their environments;

- (3) Paradox theory (Cunha *et al.*, 2021; Cunha and Putnam, 2019; Waldman *et al.*, 2019), which helps in decision making when tensions are present;
- (4) Theories of power, especially process and practice-based approaches to deal with political influences and power plays (Clegg *et al.*, 2023; Avelino, 2021; Gherardi, 2014);
- (5) Historical perspectives on development projects (Söderlund and Lenfle, 2013);
- (6) Sociotechnical transition theories using a multi-level perspective (Geels and Locatelli, 2024; Geels, 2005) or societal transformation theories (Hölscher *et al.*, 2018);
- (7) Program evaluation (Mertens and Wilson, 2018) to help address issues of social justice and/or sustainability;
- (8) Complexity theory (Byrne and Callaghan, 2022) and systems theory (Luhmann, 2013) and systems praxis (Sankaran, 2023) to address complex issues arising in project and programs (Geraldi *et al.*, 2011);
- (9) Practice theory (Gherardi, 2014; Nicolini, 2012) to address socio-cultural issues that aim for a fair and inclusive society.

We expect the papers in the special issue to contribute to UN Sustainable Development Goals 1, 2, 10 and 13.

Potential topics of interest

The following questions may help authors consider potential areas to address:

- (1) How will the research be reported to advance project studies (Geraldi and Söderlund, 2018)?
- (2) How have disciplinary boundaries been crossed (Max-Neef, 2005; Nicolescu, 2014) in addressing these challenges?
- (3) How did the research consider the notion of “boundary critique” (Midgley and Midgley, 2003; Ulrich and Reynolds, 2020) in systems thinking and systems interventions in deciding on stakeholder selection and engagement?
- (4) How did the research borrow methods and practices used in other relevant disciplines, for example, in sociology, population health and sustainability sciences (Bulmer, 2017; Casey *et al.*, 2016; Biggs *et al.*, 2021)?
- (5) How were issues arising from power and politics (Clegg and Haugard, 2009) addressed in these projects?
- (6) What role did different types of leadership play in these projects (Whyte *et al.*, 2022; Clegg *et al.*, 2023)?
- (7) How is the knowledge that is created shared and transferred within and across projects and communities (Sabini *et al.*, 2019; Banihashemi *et al.*, 2017)?
- (8) How does the research reported relate to the Project Management Manifesto (Locatelli *et al.*, 2023)?
- (9) How do the notions of professionalism and professional ethics need to change to address these projects (Konstantinou, 2015, 2023)?
- (10) What kinds of leaders and leadership are needed to address these projects (Whyte *et al.*, 2022; Kortantamer, 2024; Konstantinou, 2025)?

- (11) How professionals are using Ethics of Care – in practice and as a politic – to reshape relational norms so that they are better suited to creating social value in projects (Suchowerska *et al.*, 2025)?

Submission process and timelines for the special issue

Authors should submit a full paper complying with regular *IJMPB* author guidelines (see <https://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/journal/ijmpb>) that will be subject to the routine review process used by the journal.

The anticipated timelines for this special issue are

- (1) Submission of a 500- to 700-word extended abstract to the guest editors: 31 March 2026
Feedback to authors: 30 April 2026;
- (2) Submission of full papers to the journal: 31 October 2026;
- (3) Proposed date of publication: Mid 2027.

Note: Authors presenting relevant papers at EURAM 2026 Project Organising Special Track ST10_02 Project and Society are invited to consider submitting to this special issue.

For further information or additional questions, please contact one of the guest editors of this special issue.

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Notes

1. At present these conflicts include Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, the Tigray region of Ethiopia, Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Somalia, Cameroon, Chad and Burundi.
2. This is the case in Somalia, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, which are also suffering from climate change-induced stresses, as are Kenya, Mozambique, Zambia, and many other microstates in both the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific.

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