

25 years of 'sustainable projects'. What we know and what the literature says



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KEYWORDS

- Sustainable project management
- Sustainable business practices

Article highlight:

The authors hope to provide a common way to approach the concept of sustainable project management (SPM) and its application within project management. Sustainability imperatives and associated project performance requirements pose major challenges for project managers, not least in terms of stakeholder management. Given their long-term focus, 'megaprojects' are prime candidates for sustainability measures and it has been suggested that such long-term projects offer more realistic opportunities for creating sustainable outcomes.

What does the paper cover?

This paper is the result of an extensive literature review carried out to find answers to questions about the role of project management in helping to develop sustainable business practices. Through a mix of descriptive and thematic analyses, the authors identified the main characteristics of the literature and provided answers to these three narrative themes:

1. Why adopt sustainable business practices into projects?
2. What is the impact of sustainability on traditional project management practices?
3. How is sustainability embedded in project practices?

Methodology:

The authors employed an extensive, systematic literature review of 770 publications from 1993-2017, each containing the keywords 'sustainable', 'sustainability' or 'sustainable development', in conjunction with 'project' or 'project management'. The literature included books, book chapters, journal articles, proceedings and conference papers, white papers and other articles.

After performing descriptive and thematic analyses, as well as a word tree model and descriptive general discussion, the authors answered the three key questions above, before highlighting key issues arising from the analysis and providing suggestions for future research directions.

Research findings:

From the descriptive analysis, it is clear that the field of SPM is cross-disciplinary and rapidly growing in terms of publication numbers, while the thematic analysis shows a clear novelty of the field, with the lack of theorization, methodology applied (predominantly qualitative) and the context of research (dominated by generic case studies) typical characteristics of a research field seeking order.

The definition of sustainable business practices is a critical issue, with confusion existing between sustainability in PM processes and sustainability of the project output. This confusion makes the comparison of SPM research findings very difficult. However, an encouraging finding is that the SPM research is widely distributed among authors from many different countries, publishing in a diverse range of journals with no clear pattern of dominance.

Conclusions:

SPM is largely seen as a relatively novel requirement for project management, but something that can be integrated within current project management thinking and existing frameworks. However, it's suggested that this may prove to be the wrong starting point and that there is a need to 'problematize' the issue.

A key message from the findings is the importance of careful SPM consideration. Its achievement constitutes a big challenge, nevertheless it carries the potential for considerable short and long-term benefits. Full implementation may require a change in the core practices and values of the organisation, and it will need to be continuously assessed, with a system of evaluation and assessment to maintain regular improvements.

Significance of the research:

Ultimately, sustainability is about survival and the long-term future of the planet and the species living on it. Creating a sustainable future requires actions in the present, which demands the discipline to break free of the conventional 'Iron Triangle' and put 'projection' back into projects to create the 'future perfect'.

Comments from the author:

With this paper, we provided an overview of the literature on SPM up to 2017. Since then, this literature has further fragmented into a number of more specialised streams of work, such as stakeholder management and risk management, as authors are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of SPM in an increasing number of domains.

In this context, it is challenging to maintain a coherent definition of what sustainable business practices mean, as this changes from setting to setting. This is especially true in projects where SPM is negotiated by the ecology of different stakeholders, such as clients, owners, contractors and the project management team, each with different roles, interests and understandings. Indeed, some of our ongoing research shows how enacting sustainability in practice requires consideration of all critical differences in understandings of sustainability from the different project participants. This issue of how sustainability is negotiated in practice and embedded in different project settings will be a key direction for future research.

Complete article

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Glossary:

Sustainability:

In the field of general management, 'sustainability' refers to the different approaches that management can have in dealing with social, environmental and economic problems.

Sustainable Project Management:

This is the planning, monitoring and controlling of project delivery and support processes, with consideration of the environmental, economical and social aspects of the life-cycle of the project's resources, processes, deliverables and effects.



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