

Managing social projects

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The design of material objects (a house, for example) is a familiar practice to many people, and shapes much of the mindset and tools for project management. But is this conception of work fully applicable to the so-called social projects?

In a conventional project, the final product is usually a “thing”, whereas in most social projects the aim is to transform a situation: to reduce illiteracy, fight exploitation of child labor, etc.

Projects presuppose planning and execution of activities. When an engineer says that the construction of a wall has been completed, no one needs to ask if the wall is there, because execution necessarily implies obtaining the product. However, in a social project, activities are often designated by the result expected of them, which may not occur. Example: “training teachers in mathematics” is actually “conducting mathematics workshops for teachers” – which may or may not result in teachers being trained. The attendance list attests that teachers participated in the workshops, not that their students will perform better in math.

Even when a rigorous distinction is made between activities and their expected effects, there is an additional problem: social projects tend to be motivated and justified by problems greater than their capacity to solve. In the example cited, the training of teachers can aim at improving mathematics as a factor for the inclusion of students in the job market, which is the main demand on the agenda of a given community. It is plausible that this happens, but it will hardly be verifiable, considering the diversity of factors that affect employability.

In this way, it is also necessary to distinguish between results and aspirations of a social project. Results are verifiable effects of activities, not reduced to the simple execution of them, while aspirations are plausible effects, but not verifiable. Aspirations are the source of meaning of a social project, they are what motivates its members, and therefore should not be discarded. However, if they are confused with results, the project runs a serious risk of frustrating the expectations of those involved.

The evaluation of a social project depends on the correct identification of results, which may not be limited to results of a final nature, such as, for example, the improvement of student performance. If the project includes communication activities and adherence is voluntary, the number of registered teachers is an intermediate result that expresses the teachers' motivation and the potential in terms of students reached, and which needs to be evaluated in time to allow for possible adjustments, to ensure obtaining the final result.

The challenge of managing social projects is to articulate the objectivity of planning and control of activities and results, typical of a conventional project, with an understanding of the subjectivity of those involved – their dreams, desires, and feelings.