

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PROJECT GOVERNANCE AND PERFORMANCE OF SRI LANKAN PUBLIC SECTOR DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Gamlath, G. R. M.¹, Nanthagopan, Y², Nigel L. Williams³, L. Kengatharan, L.⁴

¹Ph.D. Candidate, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka

²Senior Lecturer, Department of Project Management, University of Vavuniya, Sri Lanka

³Reader in Project Management, University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom

⁴Professor in Financial Management, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka

methikalak@gmail.com

Abstract

Considering the diverse nature of managing stakeholders, structuring project formation and development, planning, carrying out monitoring and surveillance, and their expectations from the government to address their interests, the governance of public sector development projects in Sri Lanka has become an increasingly complex theme. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate project governance and its fundamentals for actual application in Sri Lankan public sector development projects. This aims to improve project performance in terms of the growth and sustainability of the public sector. Emphasizing the importance of project governance, funding agencies, policymakers, government regulators, and other connected partners aim to facilitate smooth project execution and achieve the desired project outputs and outcomes. The study reviews the project governance literature that fills the knowledge gap in studying the function of project governance and the effectiveness of Sri Lankan public sector development projects. It adopts a qualitative research design and analyses secondary literature and scholarly journal articles. The results show that practicing project governance and performance is mandatory to achieve project objectives that must be connected to optimal economic and social benefits toward the country's accelerative development strategy. Furthermore, the study suggests that project governance and performance serve as cornerstones of a development plan from a government's perspective.

Key words: Development Policy, Performance, Project Governance, Public sector Development Projects, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Projects are started by organizations with the best of intentions. However, many initiatives fall short of their intended objectives (Agyekum-Mensah & Knight, 2017). By concentrating on the skills of the project employees and the use of tools and procedures, academics and practitioners have worked to enhance the outcome of their projects (McGrath & Whitty, 2015; Ahola et al., 2014, Bekker & Steyn, 2009a,b). Traditionally, the success of projects has been evaluated by how well they were completed given the limitations of scope, time, cost, and quality (Turner & Zolin, 2012). Over the time the valuations of projects are being expanded to encompass stakeholder management (Yang et al., 2021) and project governance, as well as their capacity to realize strategic objectives. The term "project governance" has become associated with projects in recent decades, and some relevant issues have been addressed, i.e., guidelines have been created to help and direct projects through "project governance" (Aliza et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2010). Project governance, a revolutionary form of oversight, was put out at the project level. Project management experts have offered solutions, at every level of a project's development, (Brunet, 2018; Brunet & Aubry, 2016; Ahola et al., 2014).

As per the context of research by Aaltonen and Sivonen (2009), project specialists, professionals, officials, and employees involved with public sector development projects have to manage their intricate project operations,

such as managing stakeholders, structuring the project formation and development, planning, executing monitoring and surveillance, and project actualization, which, as a result of their extensive involvement, have specific interests and authority over the project (Alade et al., 2022). The complexity of the public sector development project has increased as a result of the involvement of stakeholders throughout. Effective project governance in this context has become essential to achieving the intended project goals (Alvarez-Doinisi & Turner, 2012). As Derakshan et al. (2019) emphasized, there is a considerable danger of project failure if this is not properly controlled. If this is managed well, it will benefit every project stakeholder in a modest but significant way. On the other hand, due to complexity and ambiguity, many issues could result from poor stakeholder participation (Hjelmbrække et al., 2014; Jayasundara et al., 2013).

Until recently, there was a growing body of research on public sector project performance evaluation in development initiatives. The project governance of public sector development projects is increasingly developing into a crucial dialoguing subject (Artto et al., 2008), both in the project management environment and in the public sector. In addition, there is an increasing demand for improving the effectiveness of the public-sector organizations that implement development projects (Khan & Waris, 2019; Khan et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2013; Khan, 2012). In the Sri Lankan context, the implementation of development projects in Sri Lanka has produced many success stories and achievements for the country's development (Jeyakanthan & Jayawardene, 2013). Infrastructure facilities must be provided in modern global and regional economic and development regimes by creating development projects to strategically implement the needs to ensure sustainability so that the significance of the project outcomes makes it clear to strengthen Sri Lanka's economic and development existence (Gunawardana et al., 2021; Gunawardana & Karunasena, 2016). Therefore, in this context, there is a requirement to enhance the performance of public sector development projects through better control of the project process through project governance and its practices in Sri Lanka (Jayasundara et al., 2012).

Consequently, the importance of carrying out public sector development projects in emerging nations is becoming increasingly apparent (Athukorala et al., 2017; Meso et al., 2009). Sri Lanka is currently in the process of implementing new frameworks and strategies for the project. The study or investigation of project governance procedures in public sector development projects, however, has been largely neglected (Samarathunga & Pillay, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the functions of project governance and its fundamentals for actual application in Sri Lankan public sector development projects. It also aims to suggest approaches, rules, standards, and recommendations for improving project performance regarding the growth and sustainability of the public sector.

Literature Review

Project governance is a broad framework for ensuring that the work done in a specific project, program, or portfolio benefits all stakeholders (Di Maddaloani & Davis, 2018, 2017; Joslin & Muller, 2016; Samset & Volden, 2015). It focuses on making the best use of material and financial resources to reap the greatest possible economic and social advantages. By using project resources as described above, one can achieve the optimal project financial and physical performance, leading to sustainability (Pulmanis, 2016; Muller et al., 2016, Mullar et al., 2014; Flyvbjerg, 2014). Additionally, new subjects in public sector development projects include managing stakeholders, organizing project conception and development, planning, monitoring and surveillance, and project actualization. The governance is conceptually focused on bringing up all issues related to social and economic obligations and responsibilities, collective actions for power dependence among related institutions, and getting things done without depending on the governmental apparatus (Ismail et al., 2021; Meso et al., 2009), as well as the specific accomplishments that must be met by all project stakeholders within the framework for distributive justice (Klakegg, 2012; Miller & Hobbs, 2005).

According to the nature of public sector projects and their governance linked with the theoretical underpinnings explored, there are two types of project governance: internal and external viewpoints. Internal project governance ignores the fact that the project governance structure should be aligned with both internal (e.g. organizational capabilities) and external (e.g. regulatory practices) contingencies (Mullar et al., 2016; Olsen et al., 2005; Artto & Kujala, 2008; APM 2004). However, public sector projects are implemented to fulfill national needs according to a periodic governmental agenda (Williams et al., 2010; Klakegg et al., 2008). The external project

governance emphasizes that the interest of project-based organizations is to ensure the execution efficiency of a project aligns with the organizational strategy through a principal-agent (project-based firm and its projects) relationship with prescribed organizations. In this connection, there is a growing demand indicating that project managers should demonstrate the value of their projects to the sponsoring organizations (financial and non-financial) with an integrated supportive approach (Jugdev & Muller, 2019; Kelly, 2010). This type of approach would be an ideal application in implementing organizational strategy through projects, thereby maximizing organizations' returns from public investments (Ward et al., 2007).

As Davis (2017) clarified, "Organizations use projects to manage customized, one-off events across a wide range of functions. Project management is an essential operational tool and process to effectively and efficiently manage resources, tasks, activities, and associated timelines". Beyond this statement, public sector development projects rather than private sector projects are presently implemented to accelerate the distribution of socio-economic, environmental, cultural, health, educational, and political benefits to the people as much as the government needs. The public sector project performance has seen a relatively lower improvement in recent years, and their inability to meet fundamental targets of cost, time, and benefits realization is well documented (Di Maddaloni and Davis, 2017; Flyvbjerg, 2013). However, an organizational strategy frequently fails to achieve desired results and performs poorly on benefits and public support due to its impact on people, places, and public resources (Bruzelius et al., 2002). At this juncture, the importance of project governance to the project's success in public sector projects is needed to demonstrate and sustain the transparency and accountability of public money through the General Treasury of governments (Di Maddaloni and Davis, 2018, 2017; Joslin & Muller, 2016; Samset & Volden, 2015).

According to the governance as practice for public sector projects, it has become a specific object of any investigation into what is done by different role players tasked with project management (Brunet, 2018). Simultaneously, the projects successfully require achieving their financial and non-financial performance by fulfilling the societal needs and the expectations of beneficiaries through project governance (Joslin & Müller, 2016) and to fulfill social expectations from the projects (Ma et al., 2017). Therefore, in an integrative mechanism for project-based organizations and individual projects (especially in public sector projects), the government and the public are essentially required to facilitate and maintain efficient and effective socio-economic project governance (Ma et al., 2017; Mazibuko, 2007); thus creating shared and sustainable value for all stakeholders throughout the public sector projects as per their lifecycle, confirming the project performance adopting different PG practices at a front-end decision-making phase in the survival of project sustainability along with the maximum utilization of project resources (Ma et al., 2017; Samset & Volden, 2015). According to the thematic nature of project governance, the following framework exhibits the context that relates to the PG practices in the project performance of public sector projects. Therefore, these in-depth concerns provide a path for considering project governance as an ethical conduct to implement the projects productively and successfully to achieve their long-term sustainability, connecting their mission to nature (Scheepers et al., 2022; Too & Weaver, 2014).

A sufficient legal, procedural, and regulatory framework must be in place for all project stakeholders to succeed in its accomplishments (Scheepers et al., 2022), even though project governance is a rigid technique for achieving the project's aims. In order to guarantee that the project performs to the anticipated project image, this framework must regulate the effective use of project resources and the completion of consecutive deliveries (Ochungo & Amollo Odinga, 2019). Traditionally, the project scope, money, and schedule have been used to evaluate roles related to the project governance theme (Project Management Institute, 2016). Beyond this, there has been a mild trend of expansion. It concentrates on managing projects in an integrated environment with the aim of project governance in public sector development initiatives (Gamlath & Nanthagopan, 2017). In order to ensure stakeholder satisfaction and the realization of targeted goals, project management collaboration is necessary for governance in development. In addition to that, project governance has been defined as a system through which a project is governed, directed, and controlled. As a result, project governance is involved in the group efforts of management and control for the entire project process to realize the project objectives and desired project deliverables (Kodithuwakku, 2022;

Di Maddaloni, 2018; McGrath & Whitty, 2015; Too & Weaver, 2014). According to Biesenthal and Wilden (2014), the creation of mechanisms for effectively regulating projects is consistent with the operationalization of project governance, which ties in with their project aims and the national development plan.

According to Levitt et al. (2010), formal and informal processes and mechanisms are in place for the integrated relationships among different project management setups in different project categories or stakeholders. The different types of public sector development projects manage different project activities on project execution, monitoring and evaluation, and performance appraisal so that every involved project stakeholder has specific interests and involvement according to their logical frameworks (Shiferaw & Klakegg, 2012). Furthermore, Parnell et al. (2011) emphasized that, whoever the stakeholders involved in different phases, processes, or procedural instances, the effect of the role of project governance on performance is increasingly becoming mandatorily essential for project success in the modern context of public sector development through accelerating the related projects' implementation.

Therefore, the role of project governance is considered most important for achieving project performance of public sector development projects through the efforts of project governors and all stakeholders based on their setout needs and requirements (Mutambuki et al., 2022; Musawir et al., 2017; Nanthagopan et al., 2016; Nanthagopan & Williams, 2016). In public sector development projects in developing countries like Sri Lanka, many projects have recorded poor performance, behind schedule, or project failure (Weerasekara et al., 2021; Jayasundara et al., 2013). In this case, there are hidden project governing issues on initiating, planning, funding, disbursement, funding, disbursement, and technical streams which connect with its current practices in the application so that the performance of public sector development projects is not at a satisfactory level. As Ihuah et al. (2014) found, the main reasons are poor performance, behind schedule, or project failure is the failure of proper adaptation of good project management practices, and those could cause many adverse effects such as ambiguous structuring and conceptualization of project initiation and execution, poor planning, scope, and resource mapping, rigorous development efforts through time constraints, unjustifiable political interventions, bribery and corruptions, procurement lapses, unexpected regulatory changes, incapable knowledge opinions, and advisory issues. Therefore, as per the revealing by Rajablu et al. (2014), the researchers, policymakers, and regulators have emphasized that role of project governance in a modern global perspective on performance is a remarkable and controversial theme to survive in project success in the public sector development projects.

Methodology

This study is qualitative, and the data analysis relies on secondary literature and scholarly journal articles. In this regard, a thorough search was done to analyze past studies on Sri Lanka's public sector development projects' performance and governance processes. A summary was created utilizing an interpretive approach to the relevant papers to contextualize the significance and relevance of the research's theme (Ihuah et al., 2014). The data was then thematically evaluated to find and describe any implicit or overt patterns in the study's content (Ismail et al., 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). In searching articles for the review process, Emerald, Elsewhere, Science Direct, and Springer online scholarly databases were searched. Out of all the papers found during the search, those relating to project governance and the performance of public sector development projects were picked and considered for a thorough analysis. The gaps related to the Sri Lankan context were then filtered based on thematic areas concerning the abstract, literature context, and keywords on "Project Governance," "Project Governance Practices," "Project Performance," and "Public Sector Development Projects." The researcher then referred to the articles. As previously mentioned, the literature review process uses a three-phased strategy to retrieve articles initially from databases, remove irrelevant articles through a filtering process to ensure the identical and analytical construct regarding research aims, and then review articles further to suit with study and analysis. In the end, the findings from the literature were scripted to close and complete the empirical gap that this study was designed to solve.

Results and Discussion

The world's developing economies must make modest progress toward developing their public sectors (Jalocha et al., 2014). Irfan and Hassan (2019) emphasized that the countries regularly implement techniques to identify their strengths and chances for completing their development tasks to ensure communities' benefits to speed up the development process. Because of its empirical nature, this project has received a lot of attention. Several attempts were performed to speed up the entire development process to make the most use of their resources, establishing project-based strategies under stringent control mechanisms through an extensive infrastructural potential (Irfan & Hassan, 2019). In order to accomplish development growth beyond life, then they apply their maximum influence to attain economic and social prosperity (Badewi, 2021).

While developed nations have timely achieved their development objectives due to the optimal project management and project governance methods. Lawani and Moore (2016) noted that compared to developing nations, industrialized countries are more eager to employ positive-shape techniques while managing public sector development initiatives (Ika et al., 2012). Achievement of their development goals helps them maintain their current development regime. As per the annual review of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2021), the government of Sri Lanka intends to make the nation the "Wonder of Asia" by developing the economy. In terms of ports, shipping, aviation, tourism promotion, industrial development, technical service providers, etc., it focuses on the country's growth as a regional hub. Sri Lanka's geographical location makes it the ideal fit for a regional economic transformation hub for exchanging financial and physical capital, particularly for attracting investments. Subsequently, rapid infrastructure expansion through public sector development strategies is essential to achieving rapid growth and development through connectivity to the world's economies and development. In the context of their economic strategies for the development of the country, many nations, including the United States of America, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, the United Kingdom, China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Malaysia, Russia, South Korea, and other well-developed economies, have partnered with Sri Lanka at this time (Kodithuwakku, 2022). The effectiveness of exchanges within each community or group of communities in the coalition is increased thanks to these measures, which also help international and national policymakers, regulators, and project governors overcome resource transfer obstacles. Enhancing the effectiveness of Sri Lanka's public-sector development projects is necessary (Jayasundara et al., 2013). The formation and planning of real-world projects, the execution of projects through a clear scope, action plan, and budget with other prerequisite plans, monitoring and evaluation procedures, stakeholder management, the achievement of development objectives, the favorable evaluation of project impacts without deviations, and project sustainability are additional requirements that must be met (Zaman et al., 2022). In Sri Lanka, the Department of Project Management and Monitoring (2021) expressed that its authority is to oversee all large projects as well as smaller projects that have previously been overseen by line ministries. Several infrastructure development projects are now being carried out particularly in Sri Lanka, indicating the public sector's strong commitment to the nation's economic development. Their development programs have combined with limited investments (Patanakul et al., 2016). Although the country's development projects require more resources than are currently available due to the country's limited financial resources, a lack of standards, a lack of capacity, and unofficial political interference, the demand for the efficient execution and performance of public sector development projects do not match the supply of resources (Abednego & Ogunlana, 2006). The public sector development infrastructure is a crucial sector for the Sri Lankan economy (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2021). It offers a variety of infrastructural contributions to deliver goods and services for the community's subsistence, economic growth, and prosperity (Yogarajah, 2017). Ismail et al. (2019) stressed the importance of public sector infrastructure development projects for economic growth. Further it has been seen that the parties responsible for implementing these projects pay lower attention to managing the challenges and problems that arise from them. In addition, many projects function poorly with low progress due to the weaker level of effective governance (Krishnan & Ramasamy, 2011). It results in illogical conception and planning, hazy scope, hazy goals, roles, and duties, misunderstandings, and delays in resource allocation and procurement (Jeyakanthan & Jayawardene, 2012; Ahmad et al., 2014). In Sri Lanka, a third of development projects never get finished because of bad planning, sluggish procurement, and other problems. The

major causes of the delay or falling behind schedule in the completion of public sector development projects may be reasoned due to the procurement delays in many projects, particularly in the context of developing nations like Sri Lanka.

The performance of public sector development projects in Sri Lanka has undergone a significant effort, and there has been an opinion of new harmonized standards, methodologies, and approaches that have been employed in industrialized countries (Gunawardana et al., 2021; Ismail et al., 2019; Foss et al., 2010; Qureshi et al., 2009). The existing project governance procedures in Pakistan are inadequate, thus it's critical to increase the capacity of execution by including a logical project governance framework to lower the level of lateness, subpar performance, and project failure (Ismail et al., 2019). It is necessary to report desired progress by the specified projects' established planning framework for the relevant authorities and governors to concentrate on allocating and sharing the work responsibility to improve the project's success (Bernardo, 2014). This will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of implementing public sector development projects (Adinyira et al., 2012). The crucial requirements to significantly reduce project failure in the context of project governance its role by minimizing the gaps that must be filled to achieve the best performance of public sector development projects in Sri Lanka include a communication network both inside and outside the projects, resource mapping, risk planning and preparedness, and project team cohesion (Jayasundara et al., 2013). As a result of the project-driven businesses depend on essentialism to survive and prosper, and to accomplish their strategic goals, it is crucial to implement and uphold good governance (Haq, et al., 2019; Bomini, 2016).

Finally, an empirical examination of the literature showed that project governance, particularly in the context of public sector development projects, plays a mediating function between the project-driven framework and administering the projects (Ifraan & Hassen, 2019). The project team and other stakeholders within various management levels must focus on their duties and responsibilities and carry them out with the project resources as determined by the project's scope, cost, and work breakdown structure (Abdul Azis et al., 2013). At present, the controlling effort must be carried out to meet the legitimate and structural mandate, particularly in the public sector, which is governed by statute by the national constitution (Zwikael & Meredith, 2018; Zwikael & Smyrk, 2012). In order to achieve this goal, project governance must be conceptualized to ensure targeted project results (Zuofa & Ochieng, 2014; Siew & Ow, 2008). The result of the project governance is to ensure the optimal transparency that guarantees the project deliverables to society and the achievement of strategic goals that improves project performance. The review conclusions noted that Sri Lankan public sector scholars have not fully discussed the function of project governance (Jayasundara et al., 2013) and performance in public sector development initiatives (Kodithuwakku, 2022; Zhai et al., 2021; Zeng et al., 2021). The findings of the review also indicated that the principal causes of poor performance or project failure in Sri Lanka were delays in third-party structuring confirmations and approvals, delays in land acquisitions, subpar performance by contractors, shortages of building materials, delays in procurement, public protests, suspensions of foreign funding, and financing and circulating issues from the treasury (Bandara, 2014).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Project governance is a continuous requirement for the public sector development projects in Sri Lanka to succeed. Empirical evidence from past research demonstrated the prevalence of practices and confirmed its legitimacy concerning the decisions for achieving desired objectives. The project governance mechanism must ensure the satisfaction of all stakeholders involved in each project operations. Project governance methods confirm the ideal prudential performance of public sector projects. In this context, project management expertise, relevant standards, procedures, and guidelines must be used for public sector development projects to fulfill the national development goals while sustaining development progress. This paper gives space for the discussion and options for additional study on the function of project governance, its procedures, and performance in Sri Lankan and public sector development projects of other developing nations. Further, additional qualitative research can be conducted to gain a

deeper grasp of the context of project governance practices and to widen our understanding of project governance and performance for project-driven companies,

The establishment of an all-inclusive project governance system is urgently needed in the Sri Lankan situation to validate the reality of optimal project performance through correctly carrying out public sector development projects. This effort needs to be integrated with the long-term national development plan as well as current and projected development strategies. Furthermore, this process might go on for a longer time without any impossible gaps. Finally, the government is constantly working to ensure sustainable development, which has several of the following considerations:

- The key players of the project must be involved in the project activities during the feasibility study stage.
- A project must get the necessary approvals and recommendations from pertinent line agencies in order to accomplish its intended goals. Due to the absence of support from other government agencies, particularly for land acquisition, relocation and so on, the majority of the project could not be finished on time. To obtain pertinent approvals and recommendations in a timely manner, there should be an efficient method. Some projects' financial goals cannot be met because the project duration has grown.
- The time taken for the procurement process should be minimized to mitigate the other impacts.
- The preparation of the bid document, including the scope of work and the specifications, should be done with close consultation of the beneficiary of the project.
- Public sector projects are considerably subjected to political influences. Otherwise, planned project objectives could be achieved much more.
- Post-monitoring and evaluation of all public sector projects by the funding agencies as well as the project executing agencies are a must to ensure project deliverables to the people and project sustainability for the country.
- In project planning, a cost-benefit analysis is done with several benefits, some of which are not tangible. It is better to have a clear idea of the benefits in the initial stage before approving the project.
- The National Planning Department in Sri Lanka must evaluate the projects to avoid duplication (two projects addressing the same issue).
- Guidelines, methodologies, and regulations must be updated from time to time to improve good governance; otherwise, malpractices will be adjusted with the guidelines if those are long-term (mainly procurement guidelines).
- Most of the technical guidelines are followed but some of them also need updating to suit available materials and new climatic conditions.
- The development of an action plan and monitoring work are all implemented in the early stages. However, many different methodologies are not used to compensate for delays in projects. Mostly, they try to find a valid reason to get a time extension rather than finding new methodologies to complete the project on time.
- Some of the projects are delayed due to a lack of materials and approval for quarrying and borrowing. All should be clearly reflective in the EIA process.
- Many projects do not include the true voice of the stakeholders; instead, the voice of the area leader is heard. They may represent the powerful hidden voices or the voice of a political party.
- The project staffing is a major issue. For the foreign-funded projects, they have identified and listed the adequate staff with their qualifications, and then it is easy to implement the work on time and with good quality. Some of the projects funded by GOSL and implemented by the department with their own staff have a number of heads, as well as their experiences, and the most important thing is that some of them handled the project work with their day-to-day office work.
- In many projects, they are very concerned with the material qualities, but there are instances in which they might have neglected the site safety and the welfare of the staff, which have an impact on the final quality of the deliverables and the outputs.
- Post-evaluation is very important in major projects; the benefits must be compared with the feasibility study.
- Auditing is a good and real requirement; they have the guidelines to conduct auditing. Some officers try to barely follow the guidelines, but on some occasions, the right things are done but they may not comply with the guidelines. Although well experienced auditors accept those things, others may not accept. The audit should be a real audit.
- We also need to talk about the timely completion, in my opinion. Enforceable restrictions also have an effect on the project. A COVID epidemic, existing foreign exchange problems, the state of the nation, political stability, and environmental variables should also be taken into account.
- Additionally, political meddling has little impact on how a project is going. To accomplish the project's objectives, we must be willing to work on our own.

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