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## Projectification in Swedish municipalities. A case of porous organizations

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### Abstract

This article aims to expand our understanding of projectification in Swedish municipalities. Above all the article explores to what extent processes of projectification can be identified and if so how they unfold. The article draws its inspiration from critical management studies and uses the notion of sensemaking to identify the practices of projectification processes. Three processes of projectification are used for an illustrative case-study: municipality's involvement with EU funded projects ; social investment funds – a new and growing phenomenon of project funding systems within Swedish municipalities; and project models – standards for how projects should be organized. Projectification, it is argued, contains more than just a lot of projects. It also comprises organizational changes and affects the way employees talk about and understand their ordinary work. Projects are described as a routine in municipal organizations and the routinely based activities in these organizations, it is argued are exposed to projectifying processes. The author argues that describing public organizations as porous is useful and needed, in order to comprise both the flexible and temporary aspects of public organizations, as well as their more permanent and rigid structures.

### Introduction

Keywords:  
Projectification  
Porous organization  
Sensemaking  
Critical management  
Public administration

Zygmunt Bauman (2006) describes today's society as something that consists of looser forms or shapes that could be put together, picked apart, and then reassembled again at short notice. For example, he shows how companies deliberately integrate forms of disorganization under the belief that the less solid and more fluid the organization, the better. Aris Fioretos calls this 'a crisis of the permanent' (Fioretos in Swedish TV-show 2013) where nothing seems intended to last very long—at least not in a constant form (see also Sennett, 1998; Fogh Jensen, 2012). Similarly, public organizations has been described in terms such as 'loose', 'temporary' and 'fluid'. Sjöblom et al. (2013), among others, discuss this in terms of a projectification of public administration and it has been argued that stable organizational structures dissolve in favor of more temporary and flexible organizations with fluid boundaries (cf. Powell, 2001; Löfström 2010).

The same phenomenon could also be described contrastingly in terms of control, stability and structure. There is considerable focus in public administration on documentation, monitoring, and evaluation (cf. Power, 1999; Vedung, 2000; Johansson & Lindgren, 2013), which suggests the presence of rather stable organizational structures. There seems to be tensions between public administration organized in a fluid, temporary and flexible manner and those characterized by hierarchy, permanent and rigid structures. Some suggest that project management combines the best of both worlds: the rational notion of controllability

and the modern entrepreneurial focus on creativity and innovation (cf. Hall, 2012). In other words, projects are popular because they are portrayed as being able to deliver both controllability and adventure (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006: 5). However, the mechanisms behind the increasing use of projects and the consequences of projectification in public organizations are often unclear (cf. Sjöblom et al. 2013).

This article aims to expand our understandings of projectification. Guiding questions in the study have been: can we identify processes of projectification in Swedish municipalities and if so how do they unfold? One hypothesis resulting from my research process is that municipalities, due to projectification, increasingly identify and organize themselves as if they were projects.

Following this section, I go through the research on projectification. I believe that research needs to broaden its perspective to grasp the implications and consequences of the phenomena. Research on project activities have traditionally been defined through its focus on single projects as unit of analysis. I argue for a perspective that also involves the environments in which the project activities are embedded. To apprehend the more subtle processes of projectification, I argue for a sensemaking approach, in which language and communication have a central role. Following that argument I discuss which methods and empirical material has been used to capture the projectification processes. This is a qualitative study based mostly on documents – where I aim to identify official statements, policies or ideas of projects and projectification processes – and interviews – where I aim to capture the more subtle processes of projectification. Following that section, the case for this study is described through three subthemes; EU projects, social investment funds and project models. I start out by describing one Swedish municipality but explore its characteristics in a wider set of empirical material. That section is followed by an explorative discussion where my findings from the case are discussed in relation to research on projects and projectification. Last in the article we find a summarizing conclusion.

## Making sense of projectification

Since the late 1970s public administrations around the world has been exposed to waves of reforms putting concepts like efficiency, result orientation, costumer orientation and value for money on the agenda (cf. Pollitt, 2000; Van Thiel & Homburg, 2007). These concepts and reforms are often bundled and labeled New Public Management (NPM), and even though the label suggest commonality and uniformity the application and underlying ideas of the reforms seem to fluctuate (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). However, due to NPM reforms an increasing use of projects, as organizational solutions, has been observed in public organizations (cf. Fogh Jensen, 2013; Jensen et, al. 2013; Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014). Jensen and Trägårdh (2012) argue that a fragmented public sector, caused by NPM reforms, encourages the use of projects. The call for collaboration in Swedish public administration over the last ten or fifteen years is one example

where initiatives to combat fragmentation are carried out in temporary forms (cf. Danermark, 1999; Montin, 2007; Löfström, 2010; Forssell et al. 2013).

Public administration has been described as a place where the use of projects, over the last decades, has virtually exploded in many countries (cf. Sjöblom, 2009; Abrahamsson & Agevall, 2009). The basic reason for this increase and diffusion of the project form seems to be that projects (viewed as a task-specific and time-limited form of working) are “perceived as a controllable way of avoiding all the classic problems of bureaucracy” (Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014: 7). The increasing use of projects has in earlier research been understood as a fashion - something that signals innovation, entrepreneurship, action and determination (cf. Brady & Hobday, 2011) or as something that can simplify or reduce complexity in organizations (Sjöblom, 2006), and has been described in terms of programs or project portfolios where several projects are bundled into a group of activities aiming to implement or develop a strategic effort (cf. Bergman et al. 2013). Much of what has been written in terms of projectification has been written about the increasing numbers of projects or project activities. However, the notion of increasing project activities in the public sector does not necessarily tell us much about what is going on in the more permanent organizations and how projectification processes in these organizations unfold.

When the term first was coined by Christopher Midler in 1995, projectification was described as a process in which a company transforms parts of its activities to be handled by autonomous project teams, within a restricted time frame and budget. Midler refers to projectification as the process which took place in a series of changes in the structure for organizing new product development at Renault, as they moved from a classical functional organization to “autonomous and powerful project teams” (Midler, 1995: 363; cf. Maylor et al. 2006). Midler identifies several organizational challenges due to projectification. One specific feature of his argument was the adaptation needed from the rest of the organization and its supply networks to the new structures:

The development of a new car involves more than a thousand professionals and hundreds of different firms. These complex cooperative processes cannot be changed in an instant by the creation of a new project structure (Midler, 1995: 367).

Projectification is, following Midler’s argument, both a transformation of activities into projects and an adaptation process of the environment. The two-folded character of Midler’s definition of projectification creates a sort of tension between the projects and the non-project part of the organization (the “permanent organization”). However, these kinds of adaptations and transformations in organizations and their environments have not been studied to any larger extent, not even in traditionally project-based organizations such as construction or the IT industry (cf. Sjöblom et al, 2015). Traditionally project management research has been defined through its focus on single projects as the unit of analysis. Packendorff and Lindgren (2014) argue that by limiting research on projectifica-

tion to organizational restructurings only, and by that excluding adaptation or transformation in the environment, “many questions concerning the reasons, implications and consequences of projectification are left unanswered and suppressed” (p.10).

So how can we understand the practicalities of projectification in the organization and its surroundings? Packendorff and Lindgren (2014) suggest a broader view of projectification and argue for a view of “projects and project-based organizing as cultural and discursive phenomena” (p.17). To tackle this, methodological challenge, one could address communication and interaction between civil servants, working in projectification processes, as acts of sensemaking. Sensemaking is then an instrument to understand how individuals and groups of individuals in municipalities understand and make sense of their own organizations. It is based on the assumption that “when people talk differently, what they see is different, what they think and do are different, and the consequences are different” (Weick, 2009: 29). To understand the processes of adaptation and transformation – how organizations become “project-like” - we need to understand how the people adopting or advocating a specific view, perspective or language about their work make sense of what they are doing.

Sensemaking can be understood as an “ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick et al. 2005: 490) and involves the construction or continuous negotiation of meaning (Wenger, 1998). To adapt a sensemaking perspective is to view organizations:

... not as fixed objective entities, clearly delimited by organizational charts and management hierarchies, but as variable and multiple representations of reality that are ‘constructed during human sensemaking activities’ (Ivory et al. 2006: p.319).

From this viewpoint, both organizations and the environments these are embedded in are socially constructed. Through sensemaking, meanings are created, deconstructed, negotiated and elaborated (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). Communication and speech have a central role in sensemaking. It is a process that always is situated in a social context and involves interaction with others.

Through a sensemaking perspective on projectification we are able to move beyond the notion of projectification as “a lot of projects”. Projectification could then also be viewed as something that changes the more permanent organizations, a way to communicate or something that creates structure and meaning in day-to-day work. Weick (1993) argues that people, in their pursuit of meaning, constantly construct and find meaning in what is happening to them. To focus on sensemaking is to: “portray organizing as the experience of being thrown into an ongoing, unknowable, unpredictable streaming of experience in search of answers to the question, ‘what’s the story?’” (Weick et al. 2005: 132).

Processes of projectification in public organizations provide an ideal context in which to consider sensemaking because these processes are settings with numerous perspectives and understandings, which arise from multiple stakeholders and different communities of practices involved (cf. Ivory et al. 2006). The

diversity of involved actors and various perspectives, it may be suggested, will lead to different discourse or 'narratives' reflecting different interpretations of what the organizations represent (ibid.).

Using a broad perspective on projectification and a sence-making approach - how can we study the phenomena, with what methods and empirical material?

## Methods and empirical material

The methodology used for this article is an illustrative case study with an ethnographically inspired approach (cf. Ybema et al. 2009). The case, referred to as municipality X, is both a typical and an "extreme" case (cf. Seawright & Gerring, 2008). It is typical in the sense that it, by Swedish measures, is a municipality of average size (both geographically and by population), they initiate and own EU funded projects (as do more than 55 % of Swedish municipalities) and they have, as approximately 80 out of 290 municipalities, started an internal project funding system within the last three or four years. However, Municipality X is also, I believe, a case that is extreme or unusual in the sense that the organization has a specific policy, and some influential actors driving the issue, on projectification of the organization. Flyvbjerg (2006:14) argues that typical or extreme cases "often reveal more information because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied". He continues to argue for the case study approach by claiming that "it is often more important to clarify the deeper causes behind a given problem and its consequences than to describe the symptoms of the problem and how frequently they occur" (ibid). In this article I try to clarify, or deepen, our understanding of projectification and its consequences through an illustration of three aspects of projectification: municipality's involvement with **EU funded projects**, **social investment funds** – a new and growing phenomenon of project funding systems within Swedish municipalities, and **project models** – standards for how projects should be organized. These aspects are chosen because they are common project activities in Swedish municipalities but rarely understood as, or studied as, processes of projectification. EU projects have been subjected to a lot of evaluations and some research as well (cf. Svensson et al, 2013), but the focus in these are often the projects per se, not the implications or effects they have on the surrounding organizations and its employees. Social investment funds are more or less a blank sheet when it comes to research and the same goes for project models in municipalities. The three aspects are also chosen because they represent three potentially different processes of projectification. EU projects can be characterized by a great distance from the regular organization; something should be tested - apart from the ordinary organization, sometimes in a separate building with a project manager recruited from outside - and then implemented (cf. ibid.). How does this distance affect the projectification process? The social investment projects on the other hand can be described as having a closer relation to the ordinary organizations: it is an internal funding system, it consists of smaller projects than the EU projects (in terms of money and people involved) where people work part time in the

project and part time at a department somewhere in the organization. This is a projectification process that the municipality more directly can influence one might assume. The project models, then, is something that should supposedly permeate the entire organization – when a project is initiated this is how it should be done!

The three aspects of projectification are also connected. The organizing of the social investment funds is heavily inspired by the EU funds, people involved in social investment projects have also often been involved in EU funded projects, and when describing the project models it is common to refer to EU projects. In municipality X, the project model is also advocated as a tool for both EU projects and social investment projects.

The empirics for the illustrative case (municipality X) consists of different types of documents - what Silverman (2013) calls naturally occurring data, such as audit reports, web pages, power point slides and policy documents. These are used to get an understanding of the more official perspectives on projects and project activities in the municipality. Nineteen semi-structured interviews have also been conducted with key individuals within, or in close proximity to, the municipality. The interviewees were politicians, civil servants and project managers at different levels of the municipality (both employees and former employees) and a consultant working in close relation to the organization. The purpose of the interviews was to help me understand how employees, narrate about and make sense of their own work (cf. Czarniawska, 1998) – how do they talk about projects and how do they talk about the part of their work that is not projects (if such work exists)? How do they argue for, or against project activities? The analysis carried out in this article has been an explorative endeavor and the empirical material has to a large extent been guiding the discussions.

In addition to the empirical material drawn from municipality X, I have studied statistics, evaluations and research on EU funded projects: documentation, meeting minutes, web pages on social investment funds, and I have done an investigation of 25 municipalities and their project models. The idea has been to start out in one municipality but explore its characteristics in a wider set of empirical material.

## Municipality X

This section aims to investigate processes of projectification in Municipality X and is divided into three subthemes; EU projects, social investment funds and project models.

Municipality X is located in the southern part of Sweden with approximately 32 000 inhabitants (SCB 2012) and is an organization with about 2400 full time, and permanent employees. The municipality has a political organization made up of a City Council, a municipal executive board and committees. The municipality also consists of an administrative organization with civil servants planning and implementing the political decisions. Municipality X has seven administrative departments, each responsible for a particular area, such as health care or

education, and each administration is controlled by a political committee responsible for the decisions, which bears the ultimate responsibility for the operations.

### EU Projects

The EU provides funding for a broad range of projects and programs. Municipalities can apply for several of these. Municipalities apply for funding most often from the European Social Fund (Spel rapport 2013) who finances projects aiming to help target groups such as adolescents, people with disabilities or long-term unemployed, and to help them find employment or become more “employable”. In Sweden, the European Social Fund is managed by the Swedish ESF council (ESF). During the period 2007-2013 ESF received 6.2 billion Swedish kronor<sup>1</sup> which add up to a total of approximately 12 billion Swedish kronor due to co-financing from the state. This resulted in some 1200 projects and about 800 of these were initiated and carried out by municipalities (Spel rapport 2013). 154 out of 290 municipalities received funds, as project owners, for one or more projects during this period.

Municipality X received funds for sixteen projects from the Social Fund for a budget of approximately 20 million Swedish kronor during 2007-2013. In 2012 a special policy was formulated on how to work with externally funded projects in the municipality. In the policy it is stated that EU projects should be viewed as a natural part of the work carried out in the organization. The policy came about due to an audit in 2009 claiming that the municipality should increase their work with EU funded projects because the full potential of the different funds were not used. The EU related work is described as largely consisting of actively seeking funds for various projects, and this is mainly carried out by civil servants at a middle management level (Audit report 2009). One of the administrative managers describes: “the initiatives to EU-projects are taken and carried out by enthusiasts, who in addition to their regular responsibilities, also undertake these” (Audit report 2009 p.5). The responsibilities for project results and strategies beyond temporary projects are placed upon project managers. An example is given in one of the interviews where a civil servant describes how organizational learning processes and discussions on how to take care of the project results were left to the project manager – a person with no possibility or authority to initiate or decide upon how to take care of the results. Similar critique is also found in research and evaluations on EU projects, suggesting that projects, even though they sometimes appear to deliver immediate results (sometimes thanks to enthusiastic project managers and project teams), seldom lead to long term effects (Jensen et al. 2013; Jakobsson et al. 2012; Jałocha, 2012; Qvist, 2012; Hasson et al. 2011; Ottosson, 2011; Tillväxtverket, 2011a; 2011b; 2011c; Svensson et al. 2009; Trägårdh, 1997;).

### Social investment funds

Social investment funds are a new and growing phenomenon in Swedish municipalities which has not been explored scientifically. The empirical material used in this section comes from interviews with civil servants in municipality X and



different internet sources: the websites of Swedish municipalities working with social investment funds, the website of Forum for Social Innovation Sweden<sup>2</sup>- a collaboration between academia, industry, government and non-profit organizations who promote the idea of social innovation and social entrepreneurship, and the website of the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR)<sup>3</sup> -an organization that represents and advocates for local government in Sweden. All of Sweden's municipalities, county councils and regions are members of SALAR and SALAR represents and acts on their initiative.

The first Swedish municipal social investment fund was initiated in 2009<sup>4</sup>. Today about 80 (out of 290) municipalities have one or more social investment funds, ranging from two to 200 million Swedish kronor. The funds are made available through budgetary surplus in the municipalities and by administrating these as funds it is possible to invest in activities that span across several years, in contrast to what ordinary municipal budgets allow. The idea is to invest in preventive initiatives that eventually will lead to reduced municipal costs. The reduced cost in the municipality is then seen as a repayment of the investment. SALAR is a big promoter of social investment funds and arranges seminars and network activities for interested municipalities. SALAR argue that societal efforts towards children and young adults, in particular, should be viewed as an investment and not be regarded as a cost. The investment perspective, they mean, demands coordination between different actors because the cost and benefits are supposed to be distributed equally among and within these parties – for instance, the investment in one policy area can produce benefits in another. The social investment funds differ between municipalities in terms of their organization, among other things, but they share the investment perspective, the idea of early intervention, the advocacy of collaboration between two or more actors in the initiatives, and that activities are organized in the form of projects.

The work with the social investment fund in municipality X started with a public health specialist mapping public health. Municipality X also refers to seminars held by Ingvar Nilsson, a Swedish professor in political economy and consultant, as a source of inspiration for the initiation of the fund. The mapping of public health included identifying and defining measurable targets for the fund, a work inspired by socio-economic calculations, something which is also advocated by Nilsson (*see* Rapport 2013:05). In socio-economic calculations an individual's (within a specific target group) future is measured in economic terms and the calculation is based on how much that person will cost society if an intervention is not made.

Municipality X initiated their fund of 2 million kronor in the beginning of 2013. Anyone employed in the municipality, after approval from the closest executive, may apply for these funds. A committee consisting of administrative managers reviews and prepares the applications for a final decision taken by the municipal executive board. The initiatives have to be projects that include collaboration between at least two departments. They need to be innovative (include some sort of development in methodology or knowledge) and be expected to lead to long-term effects. During its first year the social fund committee received

14 and approved eight applications. These were all projects initiated by civil servants at the management level.

One of the project initiator described how projects came from ideas that had been “floating around” in the organization for quite some time, but never had been tested. One project was described as collaboration between the municipality and civil society. The aim of that project was to endorse, or educate, people involved in different civil society organizations on how to apply for, and administer EU projects. The project idea came from another project which the municipality was responsible for several years ago, long before the idea of a social investment fund came about. Back then a group of four people tried to formulate and initiate the project in the municipality but without success. Different funding agencies were discussed as possible funders for the project, including ESF and the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, but were abandoned because they were perceived as complicated and the application process was too slow. When the social investment fund came about in the municipality the idea was revived and an application was written, sent in and approved. The application process is described by civil servants as structured with clear guidelines, and was created through a project model, developed by the municipality in collaboration with a consultancy firm. The same model is also strongly encouraged as a management tool in the projects that receive funds.

### Project models

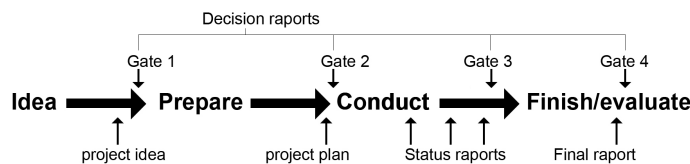
In 2010 Municipality X started a trainee program, initiated by a management group consisting of administrative executives. The aim was to recruit and train future leaders. The development manager in the municipality together with a consultancy firm developed the program. The consultancy firm was one that the organization worked with before and is described as well-known and well thought of within the organization. In the program the trainees were given a case from a group of executive managers. The case consisted of a task or issue that the management wanted to develop further – for instance, how should the organization work on a specific issue or handle a certain problem? In working with such tasks one of the trainees said it became evident that there were no structures or routines on how to work with those types of questions. There were also, at this time, several working groups in the municipality driven by energetic civil servants trying to deal with similar, often intersectorial questions. But these groups often had an unclear assignment and their mandates were often blurred.

To deal with this structural problem the municipal management begun to discuss project management and project models with the same consultants that were responsible for the trainee program. These discussions lead to a five day project management course given by the consultants. The course was also a result of an extensive EU application (sent to ESF) for a project aiming to enhance professional competence in the organization - a project that never received funding. More than 50 civil servants have now taken the course and in addition to that some departments even bought extra courses for their staff. The trainee programs and the project management courses have left the municipality with a

lot of staff with project management skills – a lot more than there are projects in the municipality. In the project management course the individuals brought assignments from their daily work. The idea was that no matter what they had in front of them it could be handled by project methodology.

The municipality has now, together with the consultancy firm, developed a project model on the basis of the project methodology. The model consists of guidelines and document templates (project idea, project plan, status report, final report). In the first pages of the guidelines it is stated that even though the project model is associated with clearly defined projects, such as EU projects, it is an organizational model that is always useful (Guidelines 2013). Support, the maintenance of existing solutions, small improvements of work or training programs are not projects but the project model could (and should) still be used (ibid.). The civil servants mean that the model has been received well in the organization due to the many individuals attending the project management courses and the trainee programs. One of them describes how several regular activities now are organized as if they were projects with a clearly defined project plan, a project leader, a project owner or client and clearly defined goals.

Figure 1. Illustration of the project model



One of the ideas of the model is to have a *gate keeper* with the right authority at each step in the project process to make a decision whether or not to continue with the idea/project. Every step has a document attached with instructions on what not to forget and the ambition is to document every important step in the project so if confusion arises the documents can be consulted.

One of the civil servants, who have also undergone the trainee program, argues that one of the most important features of the model is the idea of a well-defined owner and a clearly defined assignment, something that he believes has become more evident in the organization due to the model. He compares with projects that have external funding and states that the results from those projects almost never get taken care of and that this is due to the lack of ownership. The social investment fund is also given as an example, in the interviews, as something that was both developed with and is now running with the model as a guiding tool.

### Survey of project models

As with social investment funds the empirical research on project models in municipalities is limited. As a part of my study, twenty-five municipalities and their project models were surveyed to address this knowledge gap. The selection

of the 25 municipalities came from a google-search of the words *project model* plus *municipality* (in Swedish). I systematically went through the result until I had 25 cases and then searched their web pages for information on project models. The ambition was to locate official documents like policies or official statements, as these documents indicate an idea of how the municipalities want the models to be used. The number of cases selected was made based on the ambition to include a wide range of municipalities. The selected group of municipalities includes both smaller, medium sized and large municipalities (in terms of population) and both left wing and right wing governed municipalities. There are also municipalities from the north, middle and south of Sweden.

The project models in the municipalities are, at first glance, almost identical. It is common to refer to other municipalities and their models in presentations. However, the project models differ in several aspects as well. All of the municipalities appear to have had some consultants involved in the development of the model and all of the models are built upon a rational chain of events with document templates attached to them, as in the example above. Many of the models also refer to EU projects as a role model for organizing projects.

Some models aim exclusively at clearly defined projects—temporary activities, often externally funded, that the municipality otherwise would not have done—and how to execute them in the most efficient fashion. Others include activities in the daily work of the municipality and are seen as a general, or de-contextualized, organizational model for the whole municipality. This phenomenon is most evident in municipality X, but other municipalities have similar discussions in their presentations of their models. In municipality X, clarity, a common language and accountability are the driving forces for the civil servants advocating the model. Documents and interviews show a desire for clarity. The examples given are also examples where the language is perceived to be common and where it is evident who is accountable for what. One of the civil servants expresses how the model has contributed to an increase of discussion about why certain activities are initiated. The respondent said it has become easier to understand each other, between different departments. The models in the survey also include some sort of symbolic value where municipalities hope that their model will travel to other organizations and be used by other municipalities.

## Discussion

If we broaden the perspective and view not only the projects that municipalities have but also the environments in which they are embedded, we understand that projectification contains more than just a lot of projects. Projectification is also comprised of organizational changes, where civil servants, management and politicians mobilize in different ways for project activities – courses are created and given in project management, organizations are organized to handle project activities (or combat a fragmented organization), project models and policies are created and even the employees' language and understanding of their ordinary work is affected.

### Porous organizations

Words such as loose, temporary and flexible are used in research on projects (cf. Löfström, 2010; Powell, 2001), but if we not only focus on the projects per se (they can very well be loose and temporary in character), but also take into account the environment – the organizations initiating and owning the projects – words such as stability, structure and control also seem suitable. Municipal organizations can be described as porous, where some parts are more (or less) stable than others and more (or less) durable than others. Much like the concept ‘porous’ captures a contradictory character in a physical material, it can be used to describe similar contradictions in organizations. Porous is a concept used, first and foremost, in geology and building science where the porosity of a rock or sediment describes the fraction of a void space in the material containing, for example, air or water (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). An organization can thus be perceived as porous when it is stable, structured, fluid, temporary and flexible at the same time. Organizations leave room for different organizational characteristics, or forms, to coexist (cf. Czarniawska, 2013).

Porous characteristics can be observed in all three aspects of projectification studied in this article. First of all, project ideas were described to be floating around in the organization looking for possibilities to materialize, indicating that some things are understood as more flexible, or fluid even, than others. Secondly, EU projects were operating at a distance, more or less separated from the ordinary activities, creating small, temporary, organizational units “outside” the organization. Thirdly, the social investment projects were designed to directly interfere with the ordinary work, having the municipality to re-formulate, or make sense of, public health related work as project activities. Fourthly, the project model, and the language it brings, permeates the organization. The project, as an idea, is annexing parts of the internal organization as well as its environment. There is no clear cut boundary where the temporary, flexible part of the organization stop and the stable, routinized and structured characteristics start. People are continuously constructing, elaborating and negotiating meaning of their organization, their work and their environment (cf. Wenger, 1998; Weick, 1993; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992). What appears stable and structured today may very well be perceived as more flexible or fluid tomorrow (or the other way around).

To view public organizations as porous also implies that the dichotomy often used in research on projects, between temporary on the one hand, and permanent on the other, become less useful. These concepts of temporality are interwoven in one and the same organization, and this also has methodological impacts. When studying projectification one cannot focus on the project as level of analysis, one must take projects and their environments in which they are embedded into account as well.

In municipality X, projects are understood both as externally funded temporary actives, as internally funded initiatives, and to some extent even as regular, ordinary day-to-day activities. The municipality is a well-educated organization

when it comes to project management skills. Despite the small sized organization, a considerable amount of employees have taken courses in project management and methodology. This has rendered an organization that, to some extent, talks about itself and organizes as if it were a collection of projects. Sahlin-Andersson and Söderholm (2002) argue, in a similar fashion, that tasks in public administration are not only organized in temporary forms but also that “many processes are presented and understood as projects” (p.15). Even the more permanent part of the organizations can be described and understood as projects—defined by tasks (rather than by goals), by time (rather than by survival), by teams (rather than by working organizations) and by transition (rather than by continuous development)<sup>5</sup>. Some research also indicates that projects and their parent organizations inherit characteristics from each other (ibid; Kadefors, 1995; Anell & Wilson, 2002; Bakker, 2010; cf. Wieck, 2009). This could mean that projects become less innovative and flexible than their management sometimes wishes (cf. Anell & Wilson, 2002) and/or that the more permanent organizations focus more on flexibility and change than stability and the maintenance of previous routines (cf. Sydow et al. 2004; Sjöblom & Godenhjelm, 2009). In municipality X a specific policy on projects has been created and projects initiated are strongly encouraged to work according to a regulated project model, perhaps limiting the innovative and flexible character of the projects. At the same time, the more routine based activities are described as projects boosting the idea of temporality and continuous change. Montin (2006: 148ff) describes how Swedish municipalities are characterized both by change and by continuity, and the pressure for change, especially since the 1970s, has come in trends, for example of decentralization, workplace democracy, performance management, and collaboration (sometimes labeled NPM). However, behind these propensities for change, there exists strong continuity in the form of stable institutions for civil servants and politicians due to governmental control, political parties, and professionalization (ibid.). Organizations can then be understood as partly temporary and non-temporary, both flexible and stable and hierarchic and not at the same time. They can be understood as porous.

### Projects as routine and organizational routines as projects

Löfström (2010b), as well as Johansson, Löfström and Ohlsson (2007) argue, in their studies of collaboration projects in public administration that the difficulties in implementing project results in permanent organizations did not change the way projects were organized, or the relationship between the projects and their parent organization. Instead, the lack of implementation resulted in an increased influx of development projects (ibid. cf. Sahlin-Andersson, 1986). Forssell et al. (2013) came to similar conclusions in a meta-analysis of a Swedish municipality's project organization. Projects more often became new projects than they were used for change or development in the permanent organizations; a kind of institutionalization of the project phenomenon where the project organization provides a stable and routinized structure. If projects are understood as adminis-

trative reforms aiming to change organizations, as many of the projects in this study aim to do, they could be seen as part of organizational stability and routine rather than organizational change (cf. Brunsson 2009). The assumption is that projects will increase innovativeness and flexibility (cf. Godenhjelm, 2013), but the routinized and stable characteristics of the more permanent organizations has a strong influence on the way projects are organized.

EU funded projects are routine in municipality X, and is promoted as such through policy documents. The same could be said about the social investment projects. Feldman and Pentland (2003) argue that organizational routines are sources of change as well as stability: “one part embodies the abstract idea of the routine [...], while the other part consists of the actual performances of the routine” (Feldman & Pantland, 2003:95). In municipality X, this becomes evident when the abstract idea of the project is perceived as a routine, but what is actually being performed within the concept of the project (or within each project) can vary greatly.

While organizational routines are commonly perceived as reenacting the past, Feldman and Pentland (2003:96) argue that “the performance of routines can also involve adapting to contexts that require either idiosyncratic or ongoing changes and reflecting on the meaning of actions for future realities”. In municipality X, approximately 100 civil servants has undergone training in project management, resulting in an organization cluttered with project terminology, affecting civil servants to the extent that they discuss and ‘make sense’ of their daily, routinized, activities as if they were projects. The project model also facilitates the dissemination of the project terminology and the consultants involved function as activists proclaiming the language of the project. When civil servants, in diverse parts of the organization, are trying to ‘make sense’ of their organization, project terminology is available and promoted by management, through the project model and consultants. In my interviews, examples are given where different departments are perceived to collaborate easier with the new and common language (through the project model). Another example is where a department starts to view their task in a project perspective, which had the department re-formulate their function as a department and by that also changing their practices and presentations about their work. The talk and communication about their work had more implications on the organization than the actual projects.

### **Projects as the solution and/or the problem**

In municipality X, project ideas were described to be floating around just waiting for an opportunity to be realized. Much like the garbage can model, first formulated by Cohen, March and Olsen (1972; Cf. Kingdon 2011), organizations could be viewed as a collection of solutions looking for problems rather than vice versa. The project idea, often sprung out of earlier projects, is a solution looking for a problem. One important part of ‘the problem’ in municipality X is defined through the investment fund (as well as in the EU funds) as a perceived fragmentation of the organization (in research often said to be caused by NPM reforms)

and ‘the solution’ is projects between several administrations or departments. An understanding of the organization as fragmented seems to encourage project organizing activities (cf. Jensen et al. 2013), at the risk of creating even more fragmentation. Another strategy is to transform the solution (the project) to better match available funds. Forssell et al. (2013) gives an example where a project transforms (describes and organizes itself differently) several times to better match the requirements of different funding agencies. The same strategy can be observed in municipality X. Organizations adjust to receive funds and by that develop a solution-, rather than a problem-focused behavior and concentrate their work on short-term production rather than long term development (cf. Abrahamsson & Agevall, 2009; Meeuwisse, 1996). In sum, ideas suitable for projects, either await financing opportunities or change in accordance with existing funding resources. The ideas, or projects, seem loose in their character, but need to adapt to a more stable environment for survival, and some environments, such as fragmented organizations, seem more encouraging than others.

### Subtle projectification

Well defined and distinct project activities, like the EU funded projects, appear to have little or no immediate effect on the permanent organizations (cf. Svensson et al. 2013; Jensen et al. 2013). However, this study shows that they leave several marks indirectly, more subtle. First of all, the European social funds promote projects as an (mandatory) organizational model and solution, ready for municipalities to use – the organizational form is diffused. Secondly, the social investment funds have been heavily inspired by the EU funds in organizing style. The investment funds are in some respect a projectification of an entire policy field - public health: the organizational solution to public health issues is (through the investment funds) temporary projects. Thirdly, municipalities educate themselves, and sometimes even other surrounding organizations (as in the case of municipality X), in project management and how to administrate and manage EU funded (and other) projects, generating project competent organizations and environments. Fourthly, municipalities develop (with help from consultants) specific project models to organize EU funded (and other) projects in a specific and efficient fashion which also affect the way employees make sense of their work.

These are all examples of the influence projects have on the municipalities and its surroundings and are, I argue, processes of projectification. These are also examples of how project characteristics *creeps*<sup>6</sup> into the more permanent organizations affecting, and projectifying them.

### Conclusions

The ambition in this article was to expand our understanding of projectification in Swedish municipalities. Guiding questions has been whether or not we can identify processes of projectification in Swedish municipalities, and if so how they unfold. A short answer to those questions is, yes! We can identify projecti-



fication processes, but they manifest in a more subtle fashion than one might expect. To grasp these subtleties we need a broader perspective on projectification, one that takes the projects and the environments in which they are embedded into account. We also need methodological approaches that takes us close to the practical work in the organizations (ethnographically inspired methods) helping us understand how the organizations, and the employees, make sense of their work. Without a broad perspective on projectification and closeness to the studied organizations, questions concerning the implications of projectification are left unanswered and suppressed.

In this article I argue that projectification comprise of organizational changes, where civil servants, management and politicians mobilize in different ways for project activities. There is a professionalization of civil servants as project managers, or project competent officials, and organizational structures prepared to handle project activities. Even though some research (cf. Svensson et al. 2013; Forssell et al. 2013; Jensen et al. 2013) gives the impression that project activities (especially EU funded) have no immediate effect on the permanent organizations, I argue that they indirectly affect the organizing style, the competence of the employees and how they talk about, and make sense of their work (which in turn affects how they carry out and organize their work), and these are examples of projectification processes. The study also confirms what others have been suggesting, that projects are viewed and understood as routine in municipal organizations (cf. Brunsson 2009; Johansson, Löfström & Ohlsson, 2007; Sahlin-Andersson, 1986). Projects are also portrayed, by civil servants and in different documents, as the solution to a fragmented organization which, ironically, risks leading to more fragmentation. However, I also argue that projectification in Swedish municipalities' implies changes where routines, or day to day activities, to an increasing extent are organized, and understood, as if they were projects. These changes are examples of how project characteristics creeps into the more permanent organizations sometimes in a quite subtle way. Using an allegory of the public organizations as porous can help us understand the development in these organizations where the flexible and temporary aspects of the organizations are situated side by side or even interwoven in a more stable and permanent structure. The idea of the organizations as porous also directs our attention to a broader perspective and gives us hints on where further research is needed. To understand a porous organization (or material) we need to study the relationship between the temporary, fluid or flexible features as well as the permanent and stable characteristics of the organizations.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> 8,8 million USD or 5,6 million £

<sup>2</sup> <http://socialinnovation.se/en/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://english.skl.se/>

<sup>4</sup> The first social investment fund in Sweden was initiated in Norrköping.

<sup>5</sup> This is a paraphrase of Lundin & Söderholm (1995) comparing permanent and temporary organizational features.

<sup>6</sup> Creep is a term borrowed from Carol Weiss (1980) who argue that research knowledge is not utilized in policy processes as it sometimes is assumed. It exercises in more subtle ways. It *creeps* into the process.