

concept

Tore Sager

**Stopping weak project proposals more frequently and earlier?**

**A review of international literature**

Concept report no. 68



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**Stopping weak project proposals more frequently and earlier? A review of international literature (English summary)**

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*Tore Sager*

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Concept Research Programme  
Norwegian University of Science and Technology  
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## English Summary

This report is mainly the result of a search in English-language academic literature to track down research results that may be helpful when considering how to stop weak project proposals early in the planning and decision-making process. The report shows how project planners and researchers working in different academic fields have approached the problem of setting aside ideas that do not seem worthy of further attention and resources. The concept programme deals with big projects funded by the Norwegian state. This report does, however, also extract ideas from literature reporting on the experiences of private enterprises.

It is not self-evident that it would be an overall advantage for society to stop seemingly weak projects at an even earlier stage than today. Prospective cost savings may be counterbalanced by a bureaucratically weaker, less transparent and less democratic project consideration process. For this reason, a question mark is retained in the title of the report. Weak project proposals are those that – if realized – are expected to yield small benefits to society or low achievement of national political goals, compared to the costs and other disadvantages following from the planning and implementation of the projects.

The literature used in this report is drawn from several fields of research. Some of the fields are chosen because they have generated many contributions dealing with sorting proposals and postponing or stopping some of them. Other selected research fields offer many contributions about mechanisms that allow proposals that are not in the company's or society's best interest, to nevertheless advance through the planning and decision-making system. The studied literature is mainly concerned with idea-processing, early interruption of projects in the private sector, sources of government failure (public choice theory), problems of front-end government in the public sector, as well as the role of stakeholders and local communities in the development of projects.

The aim of the literature study was both to disclose reasons why weak proposals are not stopped at an earlier stage, and to learn which policy instruments and strategies for rejecting projects have been researched. Each analytical chapter in the report applies articles from several research fields. The

chapters survey main types of mechanisms that partly facilitate the occurrence of weak projects and partly describe methods for stopping them.

Mapping of problem indicators and sorting of project proposals in the front-end stages are important for deciding which proposals deserve supply of resources and further elaboration. Much research discusses early warnings that something is problematic about the proposal or the project. Factors affecting the likelihood of success or failure of projects have also received much attention in international literature. Such warning signs and failure factors should be utilized in the first rounds of sorting, where the assumed weak project ideas are separated from the promising. Simple methods for assessment and comparison are often used to solve this task.

Personal interest competes with society's interest in the design and prioritizing of large projects, as in so many other policy areas. Administrators and employees working on projects may to some degree pursue personal goals that are not fully aligned with agency goals or the common good. Opportunism and logrolling are partly consequences of this. Solving this alignment problem is complicated, partly due to the principled critique of the idea of 'the public interest'.

A considerable amount of research focuses on the behaviour of leaders. It turns out that superiors in politics, public bureaucracy and project development sometimes use strategies that make it difficult to get rid of weak project proposals. Superiors are sometimes unduly enthusiastic about ideas (project champions), and they may not provide project planners with the best opportunities to act in the interest of society. Moreover, leader strategies for avoiding blame and criticism for unpopular policies may motivate choice of projects that are not in the best interest of the greater society – although popular at the time being.

Consequences of complex organization and steering structure are much studied internationally. Both the complexity and the various attempts at simplification affect the possibility of culling weak project proposals. Neoliberal influence may for example result in public agencies with weak political steering, public-private partnerships, strong reliance on algorithmic decision methods, extensive delegation and devolution, and more use of external control. All this has an impact on identification and treatment of weak proposals. Simplification strategies, such as path dependence and cementation (lock-in) may allow work on a weak project proposal to continue for too long.

Struggle between conflicting interests takes place in many arenas in liberal democracies. The project-related literature on this broad theme studies, eg, stakeholder analysis, location debates and lobbying. Stakeholders often play important roles in project planning and can encourage as well as counteract the realization of projects – as can lobbying. There seems to exist some apprehension that heated local debate on project siting may threaten the implementation of promising projects.

The examined international literature points to some keywords and approaches that can reduce the pressure towards giving weak project proposals an extra chance. The following courses of action seem to have some potential:

- Conducting a systematic analysis of problem indicators relevant for the front-end phase and combine it with consideration of failure factors identified in the research papers
- Putting less emphasis on the irreversible or sunk costs when further work on projects in the pre-construction phases is considered
- Undertaking critical principal-agent analysis that investigates the possible motives of the principal to pressure agents into acting in ways that are unlikely to serve future users of the project
- Carrying out a systematic stakeholder analysis at the front-end stage to prevent later conflicts and figure out how to handle the anticipated political consequences of stopping the planning of the project
- Weakening the mechanisms for dealing out blame and guilt when a project is stopped before implementation

The research literature contains few contributions suggesting concrete means for limiting the occurrence and treatment of weak project proposals and stopping their advancement towards construction. The ideas about such instruments, which are presented in the report, are nevertheless based on the literature study. The main strategies for discontinuing the work on weak project proposals can be systematized as follows:

- a) Increasing the political transaction costs of the adherents of weak proposals and weakening their position and incentives for giving support

- b) Simplifying the stop/go decision task, as it is more likely that weak project proposals will be stopped if it becomes easier to identify them, and if instructions are articulated in such a way that fewer considerations count when the stop/go decision is made
- c) Removing subjective noise from the stop/go decisions by formalizing the decision method and putting more weight on algorithms
- d) Reopening and possibly reorganizing the search process in an attempt to find a more attractive project concept or planning alternative

Under each of these main strategies, more specific actions are briefly outlined in the report, 19 actions altogether. They should be regarded as ideas to be tested out, not as recommendations of what should in practice be done in Norway. The international research does not provide a solid enough basis for concluding on this matter.

Finally – as afterthoughts – the report offers some reflections on the possibilities of finding a fully satisfactory way out of the problems of abandoning dubious proposals early enough and thus hindering the construction of weak projects. Open systems, unrealistic predictions and unanticipated effects make the task difficult. The same goes for exaggerated ambitions, decision cycles, wicked problems, and ‘silo research’, which is too narrow to shed light on all important aspects of the problem.

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*The Concept research program aims to develop know-how to help make more efficient use of resources and improve the effect of major public investments. The Program is designed to follow up on the largest public projects over a period of several years, and help improve design and quality assurance of future public projects before they are formally approved.*

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