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# THE PROJECTIFICATION OF WORK: USING THE WORLD CAFÉ METHOD TO DEVELOP AN EMERGING RESEARCH PROGRAMME

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper presents and discusses the results of a World Café conducted to inform the development of a comprehensive theoretical, analytical and empirical framework to examine processes of projectification across diverse sectors. While the concept of projectification has gained increasing attention in organisational and management research, its conceptual boundaries, analytical dimensions, and empirical manifestations remain insufficiently explored. To address these gaps, we convened a structured World Café involving professionals, scholars, and people with political and associative responsibilities from multiple fields, namely the arts, the social economy, research and development and consultancy to collectively identify empirical priorities for studying projectification. The results highlight several key areas of concern across multiple dimensions: employment relations; division of labour; forms of work coordination and the role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT); mechanisms of labour control; knowledge and skills; funding agendas and mechanisms; work-life balance and health impacts; and workspaces. Sectoral differences, but also similarities, emerged in terms of the dynamics, drivers, and perceived consequences of projectification, underscoring the value of context-sensitive yet comparable empirical approaches. Overall, the World Café outcomes offer rich empirical insights and a robust foundation for the subsequent stages of the research.

***Keywords:*** *projectification; work organisation; research world café.*

## 1. Introduction

Research on projectification has been taking place for several decades now, but its relations with related (sub)fields are not equally developed (Kuura, 2020). Furthermore, the field has been predominantly shaped management studies and mostly Scandinavian scholars (Geraldi et al., 2025; Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014). From a specific mode of organising work in some sectors and professions, such as architecture and scientific research, to a form of accomplishing extraordinary undertakings, projects represent an increasingly larger model of organisations' everyday work (Engwall, 2003; Lindgren & Packendorff, 2006). The proliferation of project-based modes of organising work has been transforming organisations. It has been argued that "no project is an island"; it is, instead, influenced by its historical and organisational context (Engwall, 2003).

To address the gap resulting from the lack of comprehensive approaches to projectification beyond the management literature and the Scandinavian context, the research project PROWORK – Projectifying work: network organisation models in contemporary capitalist societies1, was designed with the objective of analysing modes of projectification (Kuura, 2020; Lundin et al., 2015) from a Southern European perspective. It advances the arguments that projectification constitutes renewed modes of work organisation in contemporary capitalist societies, with wide-ranging impacts on organisational dynamics and workers' lives.

By adopting a sociological and critical perspective, the study employs a methodological framework centred on the development of case studies across different fields where the projectification rationale has been intensifying in consultancy and management companies; Research and Development (R&D) activities conducted through university-industry partnerships; artistic activities; and the social and solidarity economy. This strategy enables the study to capture the three supporting pillars of contemporary capitalist societies – the state, the private sector, and the third sector – as well as the boundaries between them.

This article discusses the exploratory stage used to define the theoretical, analytical and empirical framework for analysing projectification and the empirical grounding across different sectors. The exploration was guided by three interrelated research questions:

(1) How is projectification understood by social actors,
(2) Which key trends and consequences they identify, and

[1] https://prowork.iscte-iul.pt/en/

(3) Which differences emerge across sectors.

To this end, we followed a three-stage approach. First, we conducted a comprehensive literature review of research on projectification. Second, we identified key analytical dimensions for designing the research framework. Third, we carried out a World Café to discuss and validate the proposed framework with a diverse group of experts and professionals from various sectors. This article draws on data produced from the World Café and contributes to an emerging research programme on projectification.

The article is organised as follows. First, we provide a brief state-of-the-art overview of projectification research. Second, we outline the methodological approach adopted to conduct the World Café as part of the exploratory phase of the study. We then present an analysis of the main findings, followed by the discussion and the conclusion.

## 2. Conceptualising projectification: a brief review of the literature

Contemporary capitalist societies have undergone profound transformations in recent decades, most recently shaped by the aftermath of a financial, economic and social crisis, and more recently by a global pandemic crisis, whose evident impacts on work still require full assessment. Within the broader landscape of work organisation and labour relations, project-based work has emerged as a prominent model, yet it remains insufficiently examined (Geraldi et al., 2025; Kuura, 2020; Lundin et al., 2015). By project work, we mean a temporary structure for organising work that has specific impacts on work relationships and individual performance. In some economic sectors and professions, such as architecture and scientific research, it constitutes the main historical mode of organising work (Boutinet, 1990; Greer et al., 2019), but in other areas it has been increasingly adopted as a mechanism for furthering more flexible work modalities, work relationships and workspaces (Eftaxiopoulos, 2020; Powell, 2001).

The concept of projectification was disseminated, namely, by Midler (1993, 1995), who examined the production process of Renault's new car model (Twingo). This process relied on an autonomous team assigned to the project, which was tasked with developing the new model within a defined timeframe, a budget and a set of specifications (Godenhjelm et al., 2015). This work was carried out outside the hierarchy of Renault's permanent organisation. As such, projectification has been defined as a shift from permanent processes within the firm to more temporary project-based work (Midler, 1993, 1995), or a shift toward work structured around clearly defined "time, task and team" (Greer et al., 2019; Lundin et al., 2015).

The increase in project-based modes of organisation has been accompanied by a corresponding growth in related research, with contemporary studies extending beyond the projectification of industrial organisations, acknowledging its drivers and consequences at other levels and areas of society (Jacobsson & Jałocha, 2021).

Several factors have contributed to the growing use of projects as means of organising work: the development and implementation of models of work organisation that link management rationales, leadership styles, procedures and structures of work relationships which have been specifically designed to make project work effective (Hodgson, 2004); the availability of digital and technological resources, enabling continuous online communication, regardless of the normative definition of space and time (Jensen et al., 2016); the dissemination of a project discourse on the benefits of flexible work and on being permanently available to collaborate (Cicmil et al., 2016); the development of professional activities, associations and courses specifically devoted to project management, such as "project managers" and "project owners", that reshape pre-existing professional boundaries (Fred & Godenhjelm, 2023; Muzio et al., 2011).

As a result, research is increasingly also drawing critical attention to the impacts of projectification at individual (Aguilar Velasco & Wald, 2022; Cicmil et al., 2016), organisational and societal level (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Fred & Godenhjelm, 2023; Jensen et al., 2016; Lundin et al., 2015). Based on an integrative literature review, Jacobsson and Jałocha (2021) identified four images prevalent on projectification research: projectification as a managerial approach, comprising an organisational restructuring to increase the prevalence of projects in organisations; projectification as a societal trend, exposing the increasing embeddedness of project practices in culture and social structures; projectification as a human state, reflecting its micro-level dynamics and the consequences on individuals and their identities; and projectification as a philosophical issue, regarded as a metaphysical and pervasive shift in the perception of time, space and work.

Projectification is constituted through the conception and adaptation of socio-technical networks (Callon, 1986) that articulate material and symbolical elements in modular forms, facilitating the impermanence of work. Therefore, the analysis and discussion of projectification require an integrated problematisation of the different social, technical and political axes that explain its configurations.

### 2.1 Toward a multifaceted and multilevel analytical framework of projectification

The centrality and extent of projectification challenge the organisation of contemporary work, the role of work in societies, and the implications for the micro-level of individuals and the macro-level

of capitalist societies. Hence, it challenges social sciences in general and sociology in particular, calling for a revision of theories and analytical and methodological approaches.

Placing work at the centre of the analysis, the state-of-the-art review has enabled the identification of a set of multilevel dimensions through which projectification can be examined. Contemporary analyses of the transformations of capitalism have focused on institutional arrangements, political coalitions (Amable, 2018) and market-building processes (Fligstein, 2018) that highlight the variegated character of nationally based capitalist formations. More recently, these analyses have also underscored rising convergences in institutional arrangements that are particularly relevant for the domain of work such as employment relations, especially under globalisation and the liberalisation of capital flows (Amable, 2018). However, some authors have discarded the use of capitalism as a useful concept in tackling contemporary markets and economic processes in favour of concepts that emphasise their local underpinnings, such as socio-technical networks (Callon, 1986). Research that seeks to articulate local framings of action (Preda, 2009) with the recognition of broad dynamics inherent to capitalism as a system has been less evident. Projectification entails a multiplicity of dimensions in which aspects, such as the organisation of work, the division of labour and the pooling of capital are visibly enmeshed in the organisation of private life, the ideological representation of work, expertise, professions and the role of the state.

The PROWORK project adopts a multidimensional and multilevel approach to the study of projectification, with work as its central analytical axis. The framework is articulated through the following core dimensions, which capture the organisational, societal, and experiential implications of projectified forms of work.

*Employment relations* refer to the interactions and negotiations between employers, managers and workers in "all spheres of economic activity in which an employee works under the authority of an employer and receives a wage in return for his or her labour" (Edwards, 2003, pp. 1–2). Projectification is addressed as a managerial approach and a societal trend, focusing on the contractual and normative arrangements that structure work in project-based settings. This includes contract types and durations, employment statuses, and hierarchical dependencies, which are shaped by the temporalities of projects, and by longer-term organisational and institutional logics.

*Division of labour* refers to the way the production process is broken down into tasks performed by individual or collective actors, relating primarily to projectification as a managerial approach, while also reflecting broader societal transformations in the organisation of work. This dimension examines how responsibilities, authority, and accountability are distributed in project-based arrangements, which

differ from classical functional organisations by relying on temporary or hybrid organisational forms and fluid task allocations across organisational boundaries.

*Forms of work coordination and the role of information and communication technologies (ICT)* is intrinsically linked to the division of labour and is related to how dependencies among activities are managed within organisations and projects (Malone & Crowston, 1994). This dimension articulates the managerial and societal logics of projectification by examining how work is coordinated across individual and collective actors, organisations, and time, whether within a team, an organisation, or a network of organisations in project-based work. Attention is paid to coordination routines, communication channels, the presence or absence of in-person interactions, and project management methodologies.

*Mechanisms of labour control* refer to the various ways in which organisations, managers, and institutions exert power and influence over workers to maximise productivity, connecting managerial logics of projectification with its lived experience as a human condition. This dimension focuses on how work is monitored, evaluated, and embedded in everyday work practices, through formal rules, incentive and sanction systems, and self-regulation norms.

*Knowledge and skills* engage with projectification as both a societal trend and a human condition, examining how expertise is mobilised, valued, and circulated within project networks. This includes analysis of individual trajectories, collective competences, and the uneven distribution of knowledge across organisational and professional boundaries.

*Funding agendas and mechanisms* reflect projectification as a societal trend and, more broadly, as a political-economic condition shaping work. This dimension examines how funding structures define available resources, timelines, and accountability regimes, and how different funding forms influence project design, implementation, and labour conditions.

*Work-life balance and health impacts* directly address projectification as a human condition, focusing on the embodied and temporal consequences of project work. This includes the effects of irregular workloads, quasi-permanent availability, and financial uncertainty on everyday life, health practices, access to care, and the emergence or intensification of work-related health risks (Lopes et al., 2015).

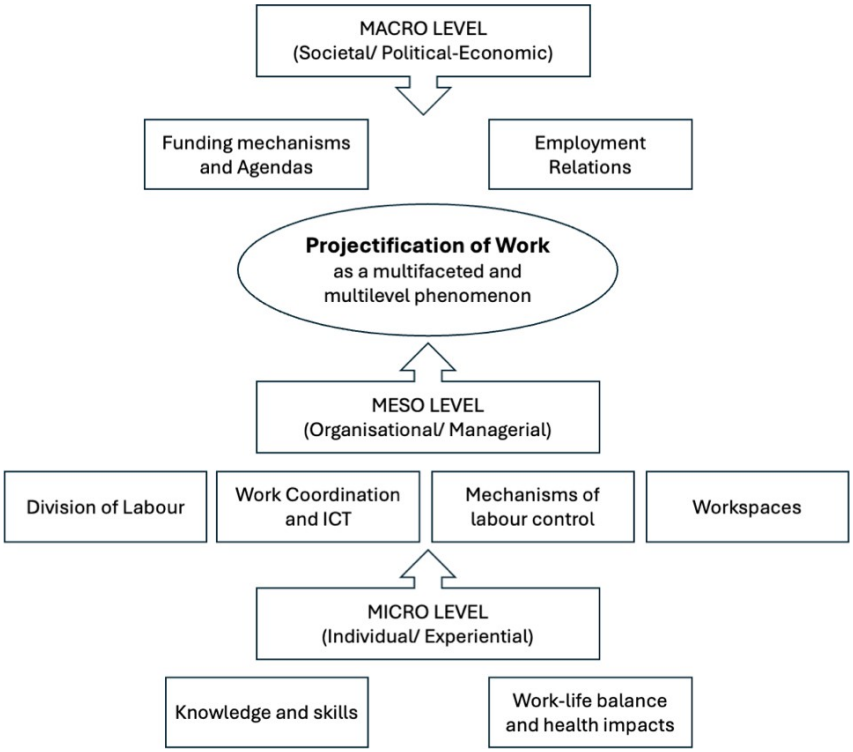
*Workspaces* engage with projectification as both an organisational and a philosophical issue by treating space not as a neutral container, but as a socially produced dimension of work organisation (Lefebvre, 1991; Taylor & Spicer, 2007). This dimension analyses how spatial arrangements shape work

practices, coordination, control, and subjectivities within projectified contexts, with a special emphasis on flexible workspace configurations (Eftaxiopoulos, 2018).

Figure 1 summarises the proposed analytical framework.

**Figure 1**

*A multilevel analytical framework of projectification*




## 3. The World Café as a method

The World Café is defined as a structured conversational process that facilitates group discussion on a specific theme. It is a method that fosters groups "to engage in constructive dialogue, to build personal relationships, and to foster collaborative learning (…), accessing collective intelligence, and creating actionable knowledge" (Tan & Brown, 2005, p. 84).

The literature identifies seven core design principles for organising World Cafés (Brown, 2005; Schieffer et al., 2004; Tan & Brown, 2005). First, *setting the context* involves clarifying the purpose of the dialogue and selecting appropriate participants; group diversity in interests, hierarchy, gender, age, and educational backgrounds is considered essential for generating innovative outcomes. Second,

*preparing and creating a hospitable space* aims to ensure a welcoming and safe environment that fosters comfort and mutual respect. Third, *exploring questions that matter* focuses participants' attention on meaningful issues and stimulates collaborative engagement. Fourth, *encouraging everyone's contribution* promotes full participation and mutual sharing, while allowing quieter forms of engagement through attentive listening. Fifth, *connecting diverse perspectives* builds dynamic networks of conversation and knowledge sharing, promoting a rich interplay of diverse viewpoints around shared core questions. Sixth, *listening together for patterns and insights* supports the identification of emerging themes and deeper questions without losing sight of individual contributions. Finally, *harvesting and sharing collective discoveries* aims to make the group's insights visible and actionable.

The sessions usually adopt a café-style format in which participants discuss a set of questions in small groups seated around tables, rotating regularly to hold discussions at a new table. At each table, participants are invited to note key ideas on tablecloths, cards, or post-its, and to share main insights as they move across tables during successive rounds of conversation. As the conversations evolve and connect, knowledge sharing expands, and participants begin to discover patterns, themes, and deeper questions (Tan & Brown, 2005).

The World Café method has faced some criticism, particularly for remaining relatively fragmented and largely concentrated within subfields of organisational development and community development studies, noting that it should also be understood within the context of the "participatory turn" in research (Aldred, 2011). Main concerns include potentially concealing structural inequalities, relying on problematic notions of empowerment, and contributing to the broader "participation industry" through the "co-option of critique" (Aldred, 2011, p. 69).

Taking these criticisms into account, the World Café was adopted as an appropriate methodological tool for the exploratory stage of the research. Its purpose was to deepen the understanding of the empirical field and to gather critical contributions from social actors across different fields, thereby informing and refining the research framework. The World Café, conducted on 30 October 2023, provided a solid basis for selecting the projects to be studied and defining the analytical approach to the investigation.

### 3.1. Sampling strategy

The selection of the participants in the World Café was intentionally diversified to ensure the presence of social actors with different positions of formal authority, status, and sectoral affiliation, thereby reducing the risk of masking structural asymmetries.

This included around 20 persons, recruited through institutional invitations and personal networks, representing the four economic and professional fields mentioned above[2], together with experts in transversal topics related to project work and the project's analytical dimensions[3]. Each of these five types of profiles included three to four participants, comprising diversity in terms of professional activity, age, gender and professional career stage. When the participants were invited, the aims and framework of the World Café were explicitly presented. An information package was provided and informed consent was obtained. Twenty participants were approached, and sixteen attended.

### 3.2. Data collection process

Special attention was given to preparing the room for the session, briefing the facilitators, and ensuring a welcoming environment. The room was organised into four tables for the group discussions and two additional tables with food and drinks, fostering the envisaged café environment.

Upon participants' arrival, they were checked in on the presence list and provided a post-it with their name and group's symbol (star, circle, square, triangle) and then asked to sit at the table according to the symbols, ensuring the desired diversity of each small group, comprising one representative of each sector and one transversal expert and heterogeneity of profiles (*e.g.* young and senior professional, men and women, etc.).

In each table one member of the PROWORK team facilitated the discussion, using a semi-structured protocol, whose questions were drawn from the literature review on the research analytical dimensions: (1) Division of labour and forms of work coordination and the role of information and communication technologies (ICT); (2) Employment relations, Knowledge and skills, and Funding agendas and mechanisms; (3) Mechanisms of labour control and workspaces; (4) Work-life balance and health impacts.

The session began with an open welcome and introduction, followed by group discussions. On each table, the facilitator introduced an initial question to open the debate on the topic and give room for unforeseen contributions and clues and then introduced relevant subtopics or moved the discussion forward when it did not develop spontaneously. Special attention was given to mitigating dominance effects and encouraging (without pressuring) the participation of all people, while also avoiding conceptual discussions that would not resonate with most participants and using an accessible language to both academic and non-academic participants. The process was structured to accommodate dissenting

[2] Cited in the findings section with their sector reference. *E.g.:* Consultancy03.

[3] Cited in the findings section as Transversal.

views and contestation. A second member of the PROWORK team was present at each table to note key points, areas of convergence and disagreement. The discussions were audio-recorded to enable subsequent in-depth analysis.

Each round of conversation lasted 30 minutes, after which participants rotated to the next table, continuing this process until all groups had engaged with all topics, resulting in four rounds. In the end, the research team conducted a final synthesis and comment on the discussions. In total, the event lasted three hours.

### 3.3. Data processing and analysis

All group discussions were fully transcribed by a researcher and reviewed by a second researcher, which allowed for the reduction of transcription errors, the completion of less audible passages, and the standardisation of the format.

The transcriptions were coded in MAXQDA 2022 and analysed through thematic analysis, coding phrases that relate to the participants' interpretations to the research questions and analytical dimensions.

The coding process used theoretically oriented categories taken from past studies, but also undertook an inductive approach, inspired by the grounded theory tradition, aiming at generating new insights to go beyond the current state-of-the-art.

## 4. Findings

The findings are presented by analytical dimension, highlighting the contributions for the research.

### 4.1 Employment relations

Project work impacts on employment relations in different ways which have been discussed in the World Café. A former trade unionist highlighted a fundamental concern: by destabilising the actors, rules, and value frameworks that traditionally underpin employment relations, project work may erode their very foundations (Transversal01). This connects directly to a broader cross-sectoral trend: the relationship between project work and precarisation. One interlocutor from the consultancy sector raised the issue of bogus self-employment in EU- funded projects. They described being fully integrated into an organisation while formally engaged as a service provider, with project hours paid exclusively through Horizon 2020 funds and no employment contract with the local entity (Consultancy03).

In the arts sector, artists' professional trajectories unfold as a succession of projects. Many workers remain unaware that the roles they perform meet the legal criteria for employment contracts, only realising this after decades of work (Arts01). This results in extremely limited labour rights and persistent challenges regarding recognition as workers.

In the social economy, the dominant project-based funding rules typically exclude administrative and management costs and require organisations to pre-finance activities, leading to a persistent struggle for organisational and employment sustainability. One interlocutor shared the experience of having "to be fired by myself and by all of us, because we've just realised that our working model is profoundly unsustainable, given the markets we have been able to access for maintaining employment contracts" (SSE01).

In the field of R&D, dependency on competitive project funding is described as structural: academic employment itself becomes contingent on securing projects. This results in long-term precariousness and weak social protection: "there are people retiring now who have spent their entire lives on scholarships… all these precarious forms of work mean that contribution bases are far lower than they should be, placing the burden of social protection on the worker" (Transversal02).

Some organisations, nonetheless, seek to counter the prevailing logic of precarisation by providing more stable employment arrangements, even while operating through project-based work. This tendency is most visible in the social economy, where certain organisations deliberately choose not to reproduce the insecure labour relations most common in their own professional trajectories. As one interlocutor explained, their association was created precisely to break with past precariousness (SSE02). They ensure that workers have formal employment contracts, even those working only a few hours per month, resorting to self-employment arrangements solely for specialised, project-specific consultancy tasks.

Several interlocutors criticise the existing pressure to extend project work to new sectors and professions. This expansion often ignores organisational specificities, relational demands, and the collaborative capacities required for effective project work. The pervasive discourse of "collaboration" within and beyond projects also contributes to a form of unilateralism that undermines collective bargaining and obscures power asymmetries:

> When we are in a society that promotes the idea that there are no workers, only collaborators, we lose sight of the fact that there is only one party. It gives me chills to hear academics and others speak of 'collaborators', because there are no systems of labour relations without actors who are in a position to negotiate and articulate responsibilities between themselves. When we

> say there is collaboration, what we actually have is unilateralism and multiple layers of confusion (Transversal01).

From another perspective, particularly relevant in the arts sector, individuals frequently accumulate or alternate between the positions of worker and (self-)employer, producing hybrid statuses characteristics of project-based labour markets that hinder unionisation and dilute collective representation:

> Often there is an accumulation of roles, a dual function: a person working in the arts sector is both a worker and an employer, or at least occupies a hierarchically superior position, even if they are not the contracting entity… There used to be an old comedy sketch about Olivia the Boss and Olivia the Seamstress. This generates certain confusions, for example even in terms of unionisation: someone who wants to join a union because they are an artist, but at the same time sits on the board of a non-profit association that receives state funding, can no longer join the union; they are no longer considered a worker because they are also, simultaneously, the boss. And what has occurred in the arts sector is that people have been gradually pushed into the position of being "business owners" (Arts01).

These blurred and hybridised boundaries are likewise connected to structural underfunding, which fosters the emergence of "pseudo-projects" (Kuura, 2012; Malone & Crowston, 1994), notably in domains that, given their inherently social function, ought to be organised as permanent (or long-term) activities.

> (...) there are projects that truly are projects – we can think of them within a project logic, with a beginning and an end, meant to develop something specific. But in an area like ours, in the health sector, where we, for example, have a space open to the public where people can come, that is not a project; it is a service. It has been operating for four years… we hope we won't have to close it. It is a daily service; people come there, it does not follow a project logic. We created a pilot, we evaluated it, it was implemented, it is running well. What does that mean? Every two years, a new application, new evaluations, so it operates as if it were a project. It is clearly a bogus project. People come, and the service is a service… it is not a project… (SSE02).

As a result of the predominant precarious employment relations, the discussions highlighted a series of negative consequences, including the erosion of commitments, rights, and social protection; increased intermittence; growing ambiguity between employment statuses; and heightened competitiveness among workers and organisations.

Even organisations striving to provide secure employment face significant challenges due to the structural constraints of project funding, which often exclude long-term employment costs such as indemnities. As a result, organisations may keep wages low or avoid offering permanent contracts, contributing to high staff turnover and perpetuating precarious labour conditions – a dynamic reinforced by funding regulations themselves. "In other words, the State itself fosters this precarisation through these kinds of rules" (SSE02).

### 4.2 Division of labour

In project networks, a central issue is how this division of labour occurs at the interorganisational level, whether more centralised around a lead organisation, more decentralised across partners, or structured through functional specialisation as defined in the terms of reference.

Despite project discourses, that emphasise autonomy, collaboration and decentralised decision-making (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005), many interlocutors argue that project networks frequently reproduce established hierarchical relations. Some organisations attempt to counter this by adopting co-management practices, yet funding rules and project architectures typically reintroduce hierarchy, for example by requiring a designated lead organisation:

> The Observatory, which I coordinate, is a research group linked to the University, and since its creation everything has been carried out through co-management and co-production of knowledge. So, there is a coordinator's name, but it's just a name – anyone can represent the group and take on tasks. This minimises hierarchical relations because we have the autonomy to reduce them. And this is reflected in the projects we apply for and in the partners, we seek out, partners like us who pursue the emancipation and autonomy of all those involved. This includes creating space for people who work directly on the ground – associations, NGOs – who until recently could not be partners in these institutional university projects. Today, some calls for proposals actually require us to include these partners, but always with one partner designated as coordinator: [for example] in Portugal, the University... This hierarchy remains (R&D01).

Access to opportunities has also been mentioned as playing an important role in the division of labour. The concept of opportunity hoarding, introduced by Tilly (1999), contributes to understanding these dynamics, as participants note that those who already possess the necessary knowledge, skills and networks tend to monopolise project resources, while others – such as small organisations or community groups – struggle to enter these networks, despite having a formal right to participate. One participant mentions: "If we look at who actually benefits, it is always the same entities – those that already know

how the game works" (Consultancy02); another reinforces referring to fishers' cooperatives: "They do not have the skills to interpret the requirements and therefore need external support; otherwise, they cannot enter that network" (R&D01).

These dynamics also manifest at the level of the international division of labour. The discussions highlighted significant inequalities in salaries, budgets, technological infrastructure, geopolitical positioning and travel conditions that shape countries' capacity to participate in project consortia and influence how tasks are distributed.

> From the perspective of the division of tasks, it has much more to do with the budgets and how they are distributed. This also further exposes the differences, for example, between Portugal and other countries in terms of budgets, salaries, and the capacity the Portuguese must have when working with partners. (…) What we feel is that certain organisations and certain countries have a strong guarantee that their projects, in one way or another, will not fail. So, for us, they are strategic partners and ones we are interested in. In the drugs field, we have the situation of Portugal having decriminalised drugs. So, in a way, we are also in an interesting position for other partners. We usually do not have difficulty being included in consortia, we are not expensive (SSE02).

As a result, structural asymmetries between countries are often reproduced and even intensified within project networks.

A further dimension, not explicitly raised but emerging throughout the discussions, concerned the social and gendered division of labour in project work. Women's productive and reproductive labour remains less visible, particularly in home-based project work, with consequences for career progression and access to project roles:

> Women tend to adapt, for reasons of work–life balance, and often even show a greater inclination toward project-based work, working from home, which allows them to pick up their children from school earlier. And this creates another issue, which we have not yet discussed, namely the invisibility of this work. Women are more invisible; those who work from home are more invisible than those who are physically present in the organisation, and this has implications for promotions and for integration into projects as well (Transversal02).

Gender hierarchies also persist in leadership, with men disproportionately occupying leadership positions, while women remain concentrated in management, production and support roles:

> The cultural sector is no exception: although the majority of cultural professionals are women, when we look at institutions and who leads them, they are men: artistic directors are men, theatre directors are men, and texts are written by men. (…) In fact, I believe there is a particular feature in the cultural sector: management and production are usually carried out by women, whereas artistic direction – those who create, the creators, those who are allowed to create and invent – are men. Women are the ones who take care of the 'house', whether it is the actual house or the institution. Management, production, and communication roles are typically performed by women (Arts02).

A final observation concerns a series of critical references to intermediary agencies, including fund-management bodies and consultancy firms, whose withdrawal or limited engagement at key moments often disrupts project processes and compromises their continuity.

### 4.3 Forms of coordination and the role of ICT

The World Café revealed the heterogeneity of organisational logics, expectations and communication practices across project partners. These differences become even more complex in international consortia, where cultural, linguistic, political, and administrative specificities shape distinct working styles and outputs. Divergent timelines, writing conventions, deliverable types, and accountability requirements demand intensive coordination efforts and often lead to misunderstandings.

Coordination is also complicated by the coexistence of organisations with very different internal decision-making structures. Smaller artistic or community-based organisations typically operate through horizontal, rapid decision-making processes, whereas universities, municipalities, and larger institutions follow longer, more hierarchical approval processes. As a result, project workflows must accommodate these different "speeds," which can generate delays, friction, and asymmetries within the partnership.

A further set of challenges arises in projects involving community participation, particularly when working with less educated groups. These challenges relate to the need to bridge the gap between project theory and discourse, on the one hand, and the practical realities and available resources on the ground, on the other:

> It is not enough to decide, in theory, that a network makes sense without then having the mechanisms in place to implement it on the ground. (…) There is an issue of municipalisation of various responsibilities, but it is also necessary to ensure that the required competencies are in place. If a theatre is operating, there must be an artistic director. If a municipality has responsibility for a particular function, there must be someone with the competence to carry out that role. I think that the management of these networks must be accompanied by pre-existing

conditions, such as training and skills development, as well as monitoring – which is something that is rarely done (Arts01).

In face of these challenges, various forms of coordination emerge within project work. Most participants described hybrid systems that combine digital and in-person interactions. While ICT facilitates frequent communication, personal relationships are consistently identified as essential for sustaining networks, underscoring the interplay between technological and relational mechanisms in maintaining interdependent project activities:

> The difference between the success of certain projects and others has to do with how we approach the time we spend together, and time is fundamental. And this time is not just about work; we also need to just be present and get to know the other person… Because only in this way can we ensure that the person becomes involved in the project and engages with us (Arts02).

Finally, the discussion on the role of ICTs in project coordination and communication was ambivalent. While digital tools expand opportunities for contact, collaboration, and flexibility, they also introduce risks and constraints, including challenges related to inequalities in access and standardised modes of coordination that privilege quantification. This can shift attention toward measurable outputs – "how many" – at the expense of long-term qualitative impact: "we end up focusing too much on ticking boxes, thinking we've fulfilled the requirements – the terms of reference, fulfilling the terms of reference" (Transversal02).

### 4.4 Mechanisms of labour control

Regarding the mechanisms of labour control, the first topic for debate concerned whether the specificities of project work affect classic modes of organisation and control – characterised by linear, sequential processes and hierarchical workplace structures (*e.g.,* Fordism and Taylorism) – and how these mechanisms are transformed in the context of expanding networks of collaboration and the erosion of organisations' boundaries as interorganisational relations intensify (Powell, 2001). One expert stressed that "there is always control", noting that this "is not necessarily negative. The existence of control, as long as it is framed within a system of rights and duties, provides protection for those carrying out the work" (Transversal01).

Overall, participants recognised a shift, at least at the level of discourse, from linear and hierarchical models toward flatter organisational structures. Yet, they also noted that this apparent flattening often masks the continued reproduction of existing logics and power relations:

From what I have observed, most of the time there is a reproduction of the control mechanisms used in regular work within project teams. When someone enters an institution, particularly a social economy organisation, they tend to fall into those hierarchies, operating in a way that is, frankly, completely perverted (SSE01).

Participants highlighted a central tension between autonomy and control in project-based work.

> What is most striking are companies that pursue so much flexibility, in terms of work organisation, methods, and the activity itself, but then end up implementing control mechanisms to make sure… Because, on one hand, it looks appealing, particularly in tech companies, even to attract the type of workers they want, who value flexibility, etc. But then, to ensure, or to be certain, that people are actually doing their work, they create control mechanisms to check whether people logged in or not (Consultancy01).

For some interlocutors, project work appears to transfer responsibility onto workers through ideals of self-regulation, with deadlines and deliverables replacing traditional supervision.

> (…) project-based work relies far more on self-control than on vertical, hierarchical control. There is coordinated and articulated management of the project, tasks, and deadlines, which requires the worker to take responsibility, self-responsibility, whether working remotely, as is often the case, or even in the office, while adjusting their schedule to the rhythms of work. This can sometimes lead to imbalances between personal and professional life, because, as we are dealing with work structured around deadlines, these limits are often exceeded in the absence of fixed working hours (Arts02).

This form of control is reinforced by objective-based management, monitoring and evaluation systems, and digital tools that quantify performance:

> We do not have fixed working hours; we work according to the project. We work by objectives: this has to be completed by week X. By that time, A, B, and C must be done, and the only control we exercise is that A, B, and C are completed. If someone works from midnight to 3 a.m. and sleeps in the morning, we do not interfere; what matters to us is that the work gets done (Consultancy01).

This quote exemplifies how project work reframes control: rather than supervising working hours, employers monitor deliverables, thereby intensifying self-management and self-surveillance.

The discussions also highlighted another distinctive feature of labour control in project work, consistent with the literature (Ram, 1991), concerning the reliance on informal networks and trust-based mechanisms:

> I think there is a form of control management that is truly based on the trust of the various parties, because everything is interconnected. If one part fails, the other fails as well. Therefore, everyone depends on each other for the project to achieve its objectives (Arts02).

A key theme that emerged in the discussion concerned the control of working time and how project demands often spill over into workers' private and rest time. Participants highlighted the contradictions between formal time-tracking requirements and the flexible, mobile nature of project work. One participant described the organisational insistence on clocking in as fundamentally incompatible with project routines, recounting how "it was an internal struggle… to stop clocking in", even though most of the work occurred while travelling abroad in collaboration with external partners. Yet this struggle "was not won," as the organisation maintained that time-tracking was necessary to avoid "unfairness with others," leading colleagues to perceive her as "not working because I was never there and didn't clock in" (Consultancy03).

The discussions revealed how projectification is sustained by broader ideological discourses and institutional logics. As noted, project work is shaped from the outset by the programmes themselves: "the first issue that needs to be highlighted is the observation about who defines the programmes and how the applications for funding within those programmes are defined" (Transversal01). This framing embeds specific expectations, rules and values that naturalise project-based governance.

Several interlocutors argued that projectification reinforces precarisation and individualisation, echoing what one participant called "a logic of an absolute capitalist spirit, of self-responsibility" (SSE01).

Power relations shape who can set boundaries, who carries risks and who absorbs the pressures generated by project demands. As one participant put it: "What we are talking about here are differences in power… If she were the one writing over the weekend and the employee didn't reply, how would that play out?" (R&D01). This highlights that projectification does not affect all workers equally, but is mediated by institutional authority, contractual status and the distribution of organisational power.

Despite the multiple mechanisms of control embedded in project work, participants also highlighted everyday forms of resistance, negotiation, and subversion. These practices range from tactically navigating digital surveillance tools to challenging the prescriptive nature of project objectives and fostering more solidaristic forms of coordination. One interlocutor described how workers learned

to circumvent digital time-tracking systems during remote work. Even with mandatory digital clock-in tools, “there were ways we marked our attendance… we already knew how to mark our presence, step out, and handle other matters” (Transversal04).

Others emphasised intellectual or organisational forms of resistance, such as subverting rigid project frameworks by reframing objectives or using calls for proposals to pursue alternative agendas. As one researcher put it, “all the topics are given; it’s up to you to be subversive and respond to a call in order to do something different. That is the main work of a critical researcher nowadays” (R&D01).

### 4.5 Knowledge and skills

The World Café discussions revealed diverse and sometimes conflicting understandings of the knowledge, skills, and role profiles required in project-based work. Participants identified multiple categories – project owners, project managers, project workers, and a newly emerging figure, the agile coach – illustrating the fluidity and ambiguity of role definitions. For example, the label project manager may refer either to a project coordinator or to an executive-level worker responsible for administrative and financial tasks. As one interlocutor noted, “the Agile Coach is almost equivalent to a director… highly paid individuals who have reached a near-maximal career level” (Consultancy01). These roles are less tied to content expertise and more to mastery of managerial methodologies.

Professional requirements vary widely. While formal academic qualifications are not always prioritised, experience and organisational embeddedness are often considered essential – “it is not required for the project manager to hold a doctorate… what is required, however, is experience” (Consultancy02).

Across roles, a common set of skills and competencies were pointed as indispensable: self-responsibility, autonomy, multitasking, coordination, mediation, and interpersonal or soft skills. Participants stressed the centrality of responsibility – “a person will show up even when sick” (R&D02) – and the importance of relational capacities in managing heterogeneous partners: “one needs sensitivity, empathy… to find a common field of work” (Arts02).

The project manager is expected to embody a broad and demanding skillset, often stretching beyond formal job descriptions. As one participant summarised: “we are left a bit to the wolves; we have to do everything or know how to do everything” (Consultancy03).

At the same time, the expansion of project-based work presents significant challenges to the retention and development of organisational knowledge and skills. Organisations must adapt their

structures, create new departments, hire or retain specialised staff, and establish new departments and organisational structures specifically designed to accommodate project work.

A recurring concern, particularly in the social economy and arts sectors, is the perceived waste of accumulated knowledge, relationships, and expertise within project cycles, which are often short-term and inadequately evaluated. Long-term work with communities and the development of sector-specific expertise are frequently disrupted, resulting in the loss of "pearls" of experience and critical know-how (SSE01, SSE02). Such dynamics frequently lead to the depletion of critical mass within organisational structures:

> (…) the experience I have is of a depletion of critical mass in municipalities, in an increasingly perverse relationship with consultancy. The few scattered consultants in the area, and the work of the municipalities, I think, is becoming completely emptied of critical mass, honestly, in procedural terms, etc (SSE01).

On the other hand, project terms of reference often demand highly specific expertise that permanent staff may not possess, forcing organisations to source rare specialists externally, further intensifying organisational strain (Consultancy02).

Participation in projects offers opportunities for piloting and skill development, but this is accompanied by top-down disruption that can undermine local knowledge and sustainability. Projects frequently act as instruments of training, but the knowledge contributed by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), field organisations, or laboratories may be lost if not integrated into ongoing practices (R&D01).

### 4.6 Work-life balance and health impacts

Discussions at the World Café further revealed how project work significant strain on workers' ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance, particularly for those with caregiving responsibilities. These challenges include difficulties in reconciling work with personal and family life, as well as with cultural, social, and civic participation, alongside the blurring of boundaries between work and home, and the invisibility and gratuitousness of certain forms of labour.

While project arrangements often promise flexibility and autonomy, these qualities are ambiguous and highly dependent on personal circumstances and organisational cultures. In practice, as mentioned above, flexibility frequently translates into an individualisation of responsibility, where workers must mobilise personal networks and resources to sustain the demands of project work:

“Thinking that my children are in a school where they go in at 9 and come out at 4, it would be absolutely unthinkable to maintain life like this if I didn’t have someone to pick them up” (SSE02).

This dependence on extended family or other informal networks shows how the “flexibility” of project work can reinforce contradictions and inequalities: while schedules may or may not be fixed, the workload and deadlines remain uncompromising, shifting the burden of reconciling professional and family life onto workers and their private infrastructures of care.

Another interlocutor deepened this critique, describing how the precarious temporality of project work shapes life choices, including decisions about parenthood:

> When you think about having a family with this type of work, which at a certain point was imperative in my life, you have to consider it with even more responsibility. So, I feel that, in the end, this autonomy is misleading. A very practical example: I had my first child and I went back to work when he was three months old because I didn’t know when the next job would appear. I even had some social-security support like everyone else, but I made these choices, which are not easy. It’s a very unbalanced balance (Arts01).

The lack of stable employment forces workers to make sacrifices that jeopardise health, rest and family life.

One interlocutor from the arts sector emphasised how the intrinsic motivation and passion associated with artistic work contribute to the erosion of boundaries between work and leisure:

> I think that in the cultural sector it is very difficult to achieve this balance between professional and private life, because they often overlap. It is hard to understand where one ends and the other begins. Sometimes we go to see shows because we want to, but that is also part of our work. So, we occupy the evenings, the week, holidays, working, even if it gives us pleasure. Work can give us pleasure and still be work. And sometimes this balance is really difficult to maintain (Arts02).

The discussions highlighted how project-based work normalises overwork through affective investment and vocational commitment, obscuring actual labour time, deepening forms of unpaid or invisible work, and further blurring the boundaries between home and workplace.

Participants also pointed to high work intensity, unstable schedules and constant connectivity, as well as the broader instability and precariousness associated with project-based work. Continuous evaluation, pressures to perform and compete, and widespread uncertainty were described as structuring the everyday experience of work. Some participants referred to situations of high anxiety and burnout.

Nevertheless, participants also emphasised a few positive aspects associated with project work, particularly its relative flexibility, the diversity of stimuli and relationships it offers. For some, the cyclical and discontinuous nature of projects creates opportunities for renewal, for new challenges, and for breaking with routines that can otherwise become rigid and burdensome. Project logics were described as enabling necessary "ruptures" to create space for renewal and "opportunities to do things differently" (SSE01, Transversal03).

### 4.7 Funding agendas and mechanisms

Funding mechanisms and agencies play a major role in driving projectification processes. Although each sector works with its own specific agencies, they map onto a similar typology across fields: the European Union and national public-sector bodies emerge as the major institutional actors, followed by private foundations, multilateral organisations, intermediary entities such as fund managers, market-based mechanisms, and local authorities.

According to participants, the role played by funding agencies in driving projectification operates across multiple levels. The most emphasised concerns relate to the impacts on employment relations and the resulting organisational instability. Participants repeatedly stressed that public agencies, especially the state, simultaneously constitute the main project funders and the actors most responsible for perpetuating precarious employment. Even when funding programmes explicitly require hiring qualified staff, administrations impose restrictions that structurally reproduce insecurity:

Project-based funding often generates bureaucratic constraints that reduce the actual employment duration and foster competition and precariousness. As one participant noted, "the contract says…36 months… No, because the university needs a budget to fire them at the end… so, it is always 34 months," illustrating how administrative rules and project parameters can limit labour stability and produce disputes across multiple projects (R&D01).

As noted above, in the arts sector, funding mechanisms are tied not only to unstable contracts but also to structural pressures that push artists toward forced entrepreneurship and the creation of formal structures to access funding.

Participants from the consultancy field further illustrated how broader transformations in funding and market environments contribute to shrinking project durations, heightened competition, and organisational uncertainty. "In consultancy it is the same: those two- or three-year projects no longer exist, because companies' strategic plans are more compressed, budgets are tighter, and project durations are shorter" (Consultancy01).

Participants stressed that funding criteria and indicators exert a strong influence over how projects are conceived, developed, and managed, shaping their objectives, configurations, and required indicators, as well as team composition, skills, and expertise, often requiring organisations to bring in specialists aligned with the priorities of specific calls. As one researcher explained, addressing these externally imposed problems "conditions team formation, specialisation, [and] competencies" (R&D02). Another interlocutor explained that in action-research projects, the "rigour of what is written in the project" becomes the main reference point. Even when research uncovers new and relevant directions, "the client or reference partner has a concrete objective," meaning that deviating from predefined deliverables creates "unnecessary strain," as additional discoveries tend to be neither recognised nor supported (Transversal01). In research, national and European calls were repeatedly described as steering knowledge production, funnelling scientific agendas into predefined thematic areas and societal challenges.

While some acknowledged that there is some room for improvement or subtle forms of disruption and for more experimental or emergent projects, they also emphasised how narrow this space has become.

### 4.8 Workspaces

This final dimension sought to identify key features in material arrangements that shape project work, with particular attention to space configurations.

When participants were asked about the workspaces associated with project-based activities, three main types were identified: remote or hybrid arrangements, virtual environments, and on-site spaces.

A first set of discussions centred on the strong link between project work and remote or hybrid arrangements, highlighting the new challenges these configurations introduce, particularly regarding ergonomics, available home equipment, access to a quiet workplace, and concerns related to posture and sedentary behaviour (Transversal02).

On-site project work is often associated with open and shared workspaces, and across the discussions a clear tension emerged between more structured spatial arrangements and the flexibility commonly attributed to project-based environments. Participants highlighted how material configurations can either facilitate or constrain autonomy, concentration, and the rhythms of collaborative work by, *e.g.,* focusing on the imposition of minimalist, standardised workspace models that do not match the nature of academic labour: "It's the clean desk and open space, everything white

and flexible. But we are an academic institution, not Google; we need books, papers, notes – and there isn't even a drawer" (R&D02).

Others emphasised that spatial arrangements are strongly shaped by the configuration of project teams and contractual ties. Consultants described a hybrid and fragmented organisation of physical presence:

> (…) it's divided between the core team – in my case, consultancy, with a stable contractual link – and the specialists hired for each project, which is different. Many of them don't interact in the workspace; they work remotely most of the time, or they go to the field while we go less often, or we accompany them but, in the field, not in a shared office. It's a hybrid, a mix, depending on the type of contract involved (Consultancy02).

A set of participants also highlighted how contemporary workspace arrangements can enact new forms of power, control and surveillance, while fostering a sense of dehumanization:

> I was just saying that we moved today to the new building where we felt very strongly the control mechanisms. We were not allowed to bring paper, books, or anything personal, because it is a clean, all-white space, and therefore there is no place to store personal things (R&D02).

Open and shared spaces also make workers more visible, and their absence more noticeable, thereby heightening subtle forms of monitoring. These arrangements were further described as undermining workers' sense of ownership over their workspace: "You can't appropriate your space or create the feeling that you are working in your own place." (Transversal03).

Some participants emphasised that workers actively deploy small everyday tactics of resistance and reappropriation. As one participant noted, drawing on anthropological language, individuals place "diacritical markers" in the workspace: personal objects or symbols that subtly reclaim territory, assert identity, and recreate a sense of identity and belonging (Transversal03). These practices counteract the depersonalisation, visibility, and control embedded in standardised workspace arrangements, demonstrating how workers renegotiate spatial power relations.

## 5. Discussion

Through the World Café, the research team gathered data crucial for framing the selection of case studies and defining the analytical dimensions. More than emphasising the specificities of the four sectors, which were the focus of in-depth research on eight projects conducted after this exploratory phase, we discuss here major trends that contributed to strengthening the conceptual framework.

Projectification of work is a clear and unquestionable reality for all the social actors who participated in the World Café. Projects feed professional trajectories and frame them. In some cases, this is accompanied by long-term precarious and unstable situations; in other cases, where the projectification trend has already a long path, organisations attempt to provide more stable employment arrangements.

Participants converged on the idea that experiences of project work – and the inequalities within them – are shaped by one's position in the project hierarchy (Hodgson & Cicmil, 2006) . Being a project holder or manager confers greater power, visibility, and security, while project workers bear the burden of instability and bureaucratic pressure. In fields such as R&D, these hierarchical graduations are exacerbated by competitive project-funding mechanisms, generating forms of structural violence within institutions and reinforcing stratified labour relations.

Project work, although appealing to flexibility, ends up being quite hierarchical, even in flat organisational structures. Many interlocutors argue that project networks frequently reproduce established hierarchical relations. Some organisations attempt to counter this by adopting co-management practices, yet funding rules and project architectures typically reintroduce hierarchy.

Despite calls for autonomy and decentralisation, coordination in project networks tends to follow orchestration logics (Kuura & Lundin, 2019), that is, a coordination process based on a central person or partner directing and aligning interdependent activities. Some instances of more distributed *choreography* were also noted, based on the interaction of a set of independent roles, without a central coordinator. Hence, mechanisms of control, often enabled using ICT, prevail and, in some cases, become more sophisticated. This generates a contradiction between formal time-tracking requirements and the flexible, mobile nature of project work.

Project work, being mobile and unstable, fosters innovation and skill acquisition, at the level of professionals and organisations, but, simultaneously, generates instability, discontinuity, and organisational vulnerability, highlighting the tension between leveraging expertise and maintaining long-term capacities.

It is deeply dependent on the funding agencies. These entities, particularly public ones, actively shape projectification's material conditions, produce and intensify precariousness, competition and organisational vulnerability: by defining eligibility rules, imposing contractual constraints, providing insufficient funding and imposing co-funding requirements, shortening project cycles, and transferring financial and organisational risks onto workers and organisations.

It is also widely acknowledged that project work promotes the erosion of boundaries between work and leisure. Consequently, spatial flexibility (Eftaxiopoulos, 2018) often coexists with pressures for efficiency, visibility, and standardisation, reinforcing the broader tension between autonomy and control that characterises projectified work environments, eroding workers' sense of autonomy, identity and attachment.

## 6. Concluding remarks

The World Café method proved highly effective in generating rich and diverse insights within a relatively short period. It facilitated the identification of unexpected avenues for investigation and allowed for the cross-fertilisation of perspectives across different participants, producing novel insights that might not have emerged through more conventional methods. Sectoral differences, alongside notable similarities, emerged in terms of the dynamics, drivers, and perceived consequences of projectification, underscoring the value of context-sensitive yet comparable empirical approaches.

The World Café outcomes provide a robust foundation for the ensuing research design and for supporting the research team in the selection of the projects to study, which was fully achieved, as it allowed for an exploratory understanding of the four economic and professional sectors and confirmed the relevance of considering them to address projectification. It also revealed that the analytical dimensions are all crucial for addressing the topic, but that they might have different levels of importance in the projects' configurations. The possibility of approaching work projectification in different economic and professional realities sustains also the social and scientific importance of addressing it.

The discussion of the results also shows how the World Café was an important methodological approach for generating and analysing data. It thus extended beyond its initial purpose, functioning as a form of fieldwork that yielded particularly rich contributions to the research. We will further develop it in a future article by addressing also the data from a second World Café held recently to discuss and validate the research results.

This study highlights that projectification should be understood not only as a project management approach but as a broader organising principle that reshapes work, employment relations, coordination practices and work–life balance, impacting society at large and the human condition. The proposed analytical framework also offers organisations a structured lens to reflect on how project-based organising affects work across micro, meso, and macro levels. Irregular workloads, compressed timelines, and funding-driven uncertainties suggest that worker well-being should be addressed as a structural issue rather than as an individual responsibility.

This paper is explicitly positioned as an exploratory contribution developed at an early stage of a broader research programme. The use of the World Café method prioritised breadth of perspectives rather than in-depth analysis, limiting the generalisability of the findings. The analytical framework therefore remains a preliminary device that requires further empirical testing and operationalisation through comparative and mixed-method research.

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