English Summary

Cross Culture Work: Practices of Collaboration in the Panama Canal Expansion Program

Serving as milestones in mankind’s development, national triumphs and technical advances, mega projects are a ubiquitous part of our everyday life. However, the construction processes of these mega projects often fail to meet expectations as they suffer from cost overruns, delays, and deficit in terms of quality and user satisfaction (Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003; Van Marrewijk & Veenswijk, 2006). This problematic performance has attracted academic attention to the management of infrastructure projects. While most studies concentrate on themes such as policy making, contracting, expected outcomes, risks and project performance, both academics and practitioners call for more insight into the ‘people’ side of project management (Cooke-Davies, 2002; Van Marrewijk et al., 2008). Requiring a combination of skills, knowledge and resources that are organizationally dispersed, the construction of a mega project can only be completed when various parties collaborate. Since each party carries its own idiosyncratic cultures, interpretations, and priorities, we can consider project organizations as complex social settings. Hence, in this culturally complex work environment, collaboration is considered key for successful project outcomes (Cicmil & Marshall, 2005; Cooke-Davies, 2002; Van Marrewijk & Veenswijk, 2006).

The objective of this study is to illustrate the internal dynamics between participants in a project organization, and how this affects collaboration in a mega project. The everyday organizational life in the Panama Canal Expansion Program provides insight into cultural complexity of collaboration and gives a better understanding of how project participants make sense of and deal with the cultural differences and similarities they encounter in their work environment. In this study I sought to understand how collaboration manifests itself in the daily practices of project participants in the Panama Canal Expansion Program.

The theoretical foundation for this research lies in the academic debates about project management and cross-cultural management. Within the field of project management, this study demonstrates the perspective that projects are unique organizational phenomena. Following this approach, researchers pay attention to the
context, culture, and behavior within the project and recognize the need to explore how the relationship between individuals and collectivities are being developed, and how power relations affect the project actors. They claim that project management research should focus on the ‘actuality’ in project organizations and should strive for the lived experiences of its participants (Cicmil et al., 2006). In the scientific discipline around cross-cultural management, this study connects with the perspective that recognizes organizations as a multiplicity of cultures. Culture is not perceived as equal to nation, but rather composed of explicit and tacit assumptions held by a group of people, guiding their perceptions, thoughts, feelings and behaviors that, through social interaction, are learned and passed on to new members of the group (Sackmann & Philips, 2004). In project organizations, where different partners such as public administrators, construction companies, engineers and subcontractors meet, collaboration is inevitable. Hence, numerous cultural differences and similarities, as well as distinctive practices and interests for participation, appear when firms and people come together to build a mega project.

Concerned with everyday work activities and the action and interaction between people, I adopted the practice-based approach to study collaboration. Research of practices examines the internal dynamics in the organization and is interested in what people do, how they do it, and under what circumstances they perform their actions; it focuses on the micro-level interactions. During a year of ethnographic fieldwork, in which I was present at all levels of the project organization, I gathered the data for this study. With a practice lens, I discovered what was actually going on in the project organization, unraveled the practices of collaboration that emerged, and came to understand how project participants make sense of the diversity of cultures in their daily work environment.

In the collaborative relationship within the consortium Grupo Unidos por el Canal (GUPC), I detected practices that hindered the development of a collaborative relationship, diminishers of collaboration, and practices that were aimed at enhancing collaboration: amplifiers of collaboration. Chaperoning, a practice focused on guiding, teaching, and supervising novices in the world of project management, represents the collaboration between the ACP and CH2M Hill. These practices of collaboration portray a picture of how project participants make sense of collaboration in their everyday work life. In the process of collaboration, actors translated, negotiated, and
developed practices to find their way in the project organization. Although they first disagreed on the route and felt disorientated, actors soon concluded that working together was the way towards project completeness. I describe this journey towards developing a collaborative relationship as exploring a *collabwithin*. This neology of ‘collaboration’ and ‘labyrinth’ reflects the complexity of collaboration.

In the collabwithin, six key practices of collaboration can be distinguished. First three manifest practices: (1) conflicting conditions, (2) seeking consent and (3) crafting reciprocal relations. And, second, three concealed practices: (1) submarining, (2) storytelling and (3) synergizing. ‘Conflicting conditions’ indicate the conflicts that obstructed collaboration in the project organization. ‘Seeking consent’ refers to the notion that actors explored for shared understandings, mutual interests and common features within the different organizational groups. The project participants’ willingness to collaborate is captured in ‘crafting reciprocal relations’. Used figuratively, ‘submarining’ depicts the act of distancing oneself from the project partners and operating autonomously without taking other project participants into account. ‘Storytelling’ portrays the stories and narratives that evolved in project organization to enhance a collaborative relationship. As project participants came to realize that collaboration is essential, they became more accepting to each other’s ideas, expectations, and practices, which are reflected in ‘synergizing’.

Placing these practices on the *Collaboration Continuum* represents how they affect the product of cross-cultural collaboration. On the continuum, the practices of collaboration are divided into three categories: (A) Adverse practices, including all practices that hinder collaboration, (B) Building practices, referring to actions and activities that attempt to bring about collaboration, and (C) Connecting practices, undertakings that enhance collaboration. The continuum proves that a practice-based approach in project management is helpful in understanding what is actually going on in a project organization, how actors make sense of cross-cultural collaboration and in what context their practices are carried out.

Finally, I portray five key recommendations for working in a cross-cultural project organization. Highlighting the importance of a cultural perspective in the management of projects, these recommendations stress the need for explicit attention to cross-cultural collaboration. After all, culture and collaboration should be high on the project management agenda.