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## Entangled public projects

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Public infrastructure projects cannot be resolved by a single governmental organization as the required tangible resources (e.g., project funding or materials), intangible resources (e.g., technical expertise or contacts), and the responsibility for project outcomes are distributed among a large number of actors. Logically, the implementation of public projects is increasingly established in networks of interdependently operating political, public, private, and societal parties. This dissertation focuses on the realization of public infrastructure projects guided by the research question: *How do the interdependencies between public projects and their (inter)organizational and political environment influence project realization?*

Interdependence has caused organizations and teams to engage in different kinds of partnerships, collaborations, and coordinated efforts with external actors, leading to (inter)organizational integration and resource exchange. However, interdependence also brings challenges for public projects. For example, the criteria for project success vary according to different interests among involved stakeholders who depend on project outcomes, such as project sponsors, parent organizations, partners, politicians, or formal authorities. For public projects, interdependence can become challenging when stakeholders push their own agendas which are incompatible, or not in accordance with project goals. Moreover, within project environments, differences exist in the ability of stakeholders to influence project decisions and outcomes, based on the extent to which public projects depend on crucial resources from specific stakeholders. This means that public projects often have to adjust their actions and decisions to the most influential stakeholders, such as political stakeholders who possess the authority to exert pressure on the behavior and decisions of bureaucratic agents (i.e., project management). Thus, the distribution of influence based on mutual dependence is likely to determine the way interdependencies are managed between public projects and their environment

While prior research has predominantly focused on how organizations cope with dependence on a strategic level, insufficient attention has been given to the daily management of these interdependencies by those involved in public projects. The aim of this research is therefore to study the daily actions, interactions, and decisions that guide this management throughout the project realization process. This dissertation places an emphasis on project realization in sensitive political environments, as this lends a unique dimension to the discussions to date. Demands and pressure from political, or otherwise powerful stakeholders, are likely to affect how public projects are realized. So far, it has remained unclear how these pressures and demands affect the way in which project

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teams and stakeholders manage their interdependencies throughout project realization.

Therefore, I aim to study how public projects manage the permeability of their boundaries in a way that enables them to simultaneously achieve primary project objectives, engage in multiple interdependent relationships, and respond to political demands and pressure. This dissertation aims to extend prior research by demonstrating that managing project boundaries might be more difficult than is previously stated when public projects are performed in sensitive political environments. In order to better understand the challenges of politically sensitive environments, this dissertation specifically focuses on the public scrutiny of public projects. Public infrastructure projects are often in full public view. When these kinds of projects do not meet the expectations of society, or have a negative impact on their environment it tends to end up on the front page of the newspapers, instantly transforming a project issue into a political problem. In turn, scrutinized projects, including the involved organizations, might have to spend a lot of additional time and energy on political issues rather than on core activities. This research focuses on how public scrutiny can further complicate the interdependencies between public projects and their environment, or can exert tensions on the realization of such projects.

The results of this research demonstrate how a history of failure in highly scrutinized municipal infrastructure projects caused severe negative publicity and public attention. In turn, this instigated heavier political pressure and stronger stakeholder control on projects that operated in the aftermath of such failure. The pressure on project teams to deliver voluminous amounts of information and modify project decisions in accordance with emerging stakeholders' requirements endangered task completion and goal achievement. Moreover, political measures were used to curb reputation loss and preemptively attribute blame to project teams in case public projects would fail. In such a context, it became nearly impossible for project teams to comply with the increasing influence of stakeholders as political measures not only became a threat to project progress, but also to the credibility and reputation of project teams and involved organizations. From literature we know that project teams can deliberately create or reinforce project boundaries when excessive pressure and demands threaten project completion. In such circumstances, it may feel or even be necessary to ward off external interference in order to restore stability, enable productive internal operations, or reduce disturbing interference.

However, this research demonstrates that in sensitive political environments, reinforcing boundaries is much more difficult than prior research has acknowledged.

Project teams can strive to be “left alone”, but will not succeed when the credibility of stakeholders has been harmed (failed projects), or is at risk (low trust in project outcomes). In turn, public projects get caught up in a bend or break situation in which it is almost impossible for project teams to adjust to, or close themselves off, from their environment. While past research predominantly sought to explain how teams or organizations can create or reinforce boundaries and why this might be necessary, this research extends prior studies by showing that using such strategies might be ineffective when public projects are performed in politically sensitive environments.

The findings of this research also indicate that the political demands and pressure on public projects were predominantly aimed at ensuring timely project completion within budget. As the continuation of public projects required the approval of political stakeholders, project teams continually had to adjust to these demands. In doing so, the scrutinized public infrastructure projects became a vehicle for powerful political stakeholders. Dancing to the tune of political leaders came at the expense of the available time, energy, and attention spent on managing interdependencies with other legitimate stakeholders. For example, the political pressure on timely project completion often amplified feelings of time pressure and increased the necessity for quick decision-making within project teams. In turn, project teams were less able to focus on knowledge integration and coordination with other departments or stakeholder groups with useful knowledge and expertise for the realization of infrastructure work. This eventually harmed the interests of other stakeholder groups or the long-term objectives of involved organizations. For example, completed infrastructure work often did not meet requirements for the long term maintainability and sustainability of infrastructure work.

These findings demonstrate how the interdependence between public projects and their political environment caused the destabilization of carefully built relations between projects and supposed collaborative partners within their environment. Despite these challenges, political accountability along hierarchical lines has long been the primary method of controlling the acts of those who operate within public organizations. This seems logical as political leaders are democratically elected to serve the public interests and therefore have the authority to monitor and steer the behavior and decisions of bureaucratic agents (project management). However, this research indicates that this does not apply for settings in which public projects are a joint effort and shared responsibility of multiple teams, departments, and organizations with different but legitimate interests in project outcomes. Prior research already argued that in such settings, establishing

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who are principals and who are agents is nearly impossible, or difficult at best. This dissertation extends these arguments by demonstrating that in case of excessive political involvement the interests of other involved stakeholders may be harmed, reducing the overall effectiveness of public networks to collaboratively realize public projects.

In conclusion, this dissertation demonstrates how the diverse interdependencies of public projects within sensitive political environments can threaten both project realization and the achievement of overarching objectives. This does not imply that public projects are doomed to fail. Rather, by acknowledging the tensions which public scrutiny and political pressure can exert on public projects, involved actors can deal better with the realities of their position within an intricate web of public, private, and political players.

This research also provides important implications for practice. A new way of thinking is advised for those involved in the performance of highly scrutinized public work. In case of underperforming or failed public organizations, political leaders tend to react by imposing measures aimed at increasing control over public agents. Politicians or policy makers in the public eye are advised that such measures can derail projects or force projects in undesirable directions. Moreover, politicians tend to make public statements committing the involved (failed) organizations to uphold new strategies, or they announce some kind of diagnosis, evaluation, or audit to solve the specific causes of underperformance. This research implies that highly scrutinized public projects or organizations, as a target of publicly displayed political measures, feel clearly exposed and vulnerable, which causes anxiety among involved actors. In these kinds of circumstances, much can be gained from the manner in which such statements and announcements are framed.

From the project perspective, this research also indicates that a new way of stakeholder management is required in order to cope with the unique complexities of performing public projects in politically sensitive environments. The findings suggest that projects are often insufficiently aware of the competing or overlapping needs, expectations, and requirements of different stakeholder groups, causing unexpected and problematic actions from the project network. To enable project teams to better cope with their environment, I propose a new strategy in which the complete equation of stakeholder interests and their interrelatedness is integrated in decision making processes.