



Stability & reconstruction operations as mega projects: Drivers of temporary network effectiveness

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Abstract

Mega projects require a temporary network of contributors. Stability & Reconstruction Operations are examined as mega projects, characterized by high levels of ambiguity and a non-permissive environment. The objective of this paper is to introduce a developmental view on managing a temporary network of contributors, and to examine in which dimensions development needs to take place. Drawing on mega project management and network theory, development of a temporary network of contributors is conceptualized using four phases: forming, storming, norming and performing. Data collection for our qualitative case study on Afghanistan focused on international actors involved in Afghanistan. We identified development challenges across four dimensions: heterogeneous stakeholders, governance, knowledge and coordination routines, and performance management. Researchers and practitioners may use this developmental view to better understand why mega projects fail or succeed, in particular when these concern heterogeneous network partners and (potentially) adversarial relationships among stakeholders in the project's local context.

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1. Introduction

Managing contributors to projects has been recognized as a key project management. Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) includes for instance human resource management in its guide (PMI, 2008). The guide's 'executing process group' contains various practices referring to teams: acquire, develop and manage. While much research has been devoted to project team development (Robert et al., 2009; Hoegl et al., 2004; Kotlarsky et al., 2015), a key question is how such developmental practices scale when project size

increases. Researchers found that project management in small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is more people oriented compared with projects in large organizations (Turner et al., 2010). On the other side of the spectrum, increasingly temporary work entails mega projects to construct very large infrastructures, promote regional and urban development, organize global-scale events and intervene in crisis-struck regions (Chang et al., 2013; Stringer, 2010; Flyvbjerg et al., 2004; Flyvbjerg and Stewart, 2012; Ika and Hodgson, 2014). These mega projects do not rely on a particular team but on a temporary network (Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008; Li, 2014; Kavanagh and Kelly, 2002). Management of project contributors thus demands network governance (Provan and Kenis, 2008) — in addition to team management common to projects. Moreover, since mega projects span multiple organizational and often geographical contexts, involvement of stakeholders with varying levels of interests and contributions becomes a

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Table 1
Management of project contributors.

Management of project contributors	Project size		
	Small	Medium-large	Mega
Contributors	Small team, specialists	Sizable team, specialists and project managers	Temporary network of multiple teams, numerous specialists and project managers
Mode of cooperating	Informal	Formal and informal	Governance, formal and informal
Organizational context	Organizational department	Multiple departments, possibly involvement of multiple organizations	Involvement of multiple organizations
Complexity	Content of project work	Content of project work and to some extent its context	Content of project work and its multiple contexts
Relationship of management of project contributors to overall project management and performance	Subtask of project management	Considerable attention to management of contributors in relation to project management	Pivotal process of managing contributors in relation to project management
Key challenge	Enthuse informal team to perform, limited external context	Balance team processes and project output demands, attention for contextual demands	Form temporary network, make governance effective, focus on overarching objective, ensure pockets of informal cooperation, highly complex context with multiple stakeholders

major challenge (Jones and Lichtenstein, 2008). Finally, mega size implies that project objectives encompass both macro (positive national or international contributions) and micro (e.g. local) performances (Ika, 2012). Table 1 shows how management of project contributors shifts as project size increases.

Mega projects need more research since increasingly infrastructures and other endeavors rely on these types of projects, and their success rate remains low (Morris and Hough, 1987). Within mega projects, different categories can be distinguished based on two dimensions, Table 2. *Permissiveness of the environment* (Petkac and Badger, 2000): highly permissive denotes a relatively safe environment such as stable, developed countries, versus low for dangerous regions of the world. *Extent to which project objectives and processes are unambiguous* to differentiate between work that can be understood in terms of output and process (Reinecke and Ansari, 2016), versus situation characterized by ambiguity of these elements.

Our research is uniquely positioned in two ways. First, while mega project studies tend to focus on construction (i.e. pre-planned) including specific sites (Yang et al., 2014) and urban infrastructures (Siemiatycki, 2005), we seek to extend this category of project management research to include projects focused on turning around societal realities that are perceived as being highly undesirable.¹ These mega projects are commonly not pre-planned as they are triggered by difficult and unpredictable circumstances. Political goals immediately emerge to address undesirable societal conditions. Examples include crisis response (e.g. Katrina, Haiti, 9/11, Nepal, Pakistan, Nigeria Delta) (Webb and Chevreau, 2006) and Stability & reconstruction operation (S&RO) (e.g. Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan) (Rietjens et al., 2009).

Second, research so far has examined the challenge of managing contributors across the types of mega projects (e.g. Flyvbjerg and Stewart, 2012; Flyvbjerg et al., 2004; Ika and

Hodgson, 2014). However, most of the research tends to look at factors contributing to the difficulty of mega project management. This factor-based approach is essential for understanding which dimensions mega project management should pay attention to and invest in to increase the likelihood of success. Yet the process through which development of mega projects could be improved remains unknown. In particular, developing the temporary network of contributors to these projects is ill-understood. Thus far, few researchers interested in mega projects have picked up on the idea of team formation – theory on forming, storming, norming and performing – in small projects and have examined what these insights mean for mega projects. This developmental view can shed new light on why management of contributors in mega projects proves challenging. The objective of this paper to introduce a developmental view on managing contributors in mega projects, and to examine in which dimensions development needs to take place. Our conceptual work builds on mega project management literature and temporary networks constituting the set of contributors to mega projects. Empirical research on a revelatory and extreme case of mega projects was conducted: Stability & reconstruction operation (S&RO) in Afghanistan. In project management literature, ‘operations’ as ongoing, repetitive business processes are contrasted with projects (PMI, 2008). Yet in military studies, ‘an operation’ refers to a time-bound intervention in a particular theater to accomplish a task or mission (JCS, 2011). In this study, S&ROs are considered projects because they rely on a time-bound political mandate, and mega projects due to their immense financial and operational scale.

As a revelatory case (Yin, 2009), Afghanistan is a major and fairly recent undertaking with strong impacts on participating countries (Harrison, 2009; Jockel, 2014; Davids et al., 2013). Public, commercial, military and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) contribute to for instance the S&RO of Afghanistan, as they attempt to improve life in a complex, fragile, and volatile post-war context (Voorhoeve, 2010; Weinberger, 2002; Sinno, 2008). We consider these organizations a network when their

¹ In this study we concentrate on undesirable realities in an insecure environment. We do not elaborate on international development studies, e.g. bottom-of-the-pyramid type of programs.

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