Towards an improved understanding of project stakeholder landscapes

Kirsi Aaltonen *, Jaakko Kujala

University of Oulu, Industrial Engineering and Management, P.O. Box 4610, FIN-90014 University of Oulu, Finland

Abstract

Understanding stakeholders, their influences and devising engagement strategies based on the analyses of stakeholder landscapes has become one of the key capabilities within project-based firms. Based on a systematic literature review of the project stakeholder management literature, we develop a conceptual framework for characterizing and classifying project stakeholder landscapes. The framework synthesizes four key dimensions of project stakeholder landscapes and their various sub-factors: complexity (element and relationship complexity), uncertainty, dynamism and the institutional context. The developed framework will provide both academics and practitioners with a shared language to make sense of what types of stakeholder landscapes exist, to categorize projects based on their stakeholder environments and to start evaluating what types of implications different types of landscapes have on stakeholder management and project management in general.
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1. Introduction

The disposal of nuclear waste in deep geological repositories is an increasingly popular topic around the globe. In the United States, the funding from a widely debated Yucca Mountain nuclear repository project was recently withdrawn. How is this possible after so many resources and so much energy were dedicated to the development and shaping of the megaproject for decades? In its analysis of what is called Yucca Mountain failure, the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future suggests the simplification of the complex stakeholder environment of the project consisting of a multitude of stakeholders with converging interests. Similarly, the literature on large engineering and infrastructure projects suggests that the social complexity of these projects, associated particularly with the number of, variety of and relationships among project stakeholders is a key managerial challenge (Flyvbjerg, 2014;

Mok et al., 2014). Anecdotal accounts and emerging research from new product development and internal development project contexts (e.g., Beringer et al., 2012) also discuss the challenges that projects have faced when interacting within their rugged or foggy stakeholder contexts. There are also projects that successfully meet their stakeholder demands and perform exceptionally within their supportive stakeholder landscapes. But how exactly can project stakeholder landscapes be conceptualized and what are their key dimensions?

Despite the rich, extensive and multidisciplinary research on project stakeholder management (Cleland, 1986; Eskerod et al., 2015), in our view, prior research has paid very limited attention for conceptualizing and understanding better and more holistically the nature of different types of project stakeholder environments, their pivotal characteristics, key dimensions and implications for project management. Instead, much research effort has been devoted to the development of conceptual tools, conventional techniques and theoretical frameworks to analyze the attributes of single stakeholders and dyadic relationships between the project and its stakeholders (e.g., Bourne and Walker, 2005; Olander and Landin, 2005; Winch, 2004). More

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: kirsi.aaltonen@oulu.fi (K. Aaltonen), jaakko.kujala@oulu.fi (J. Kujala).

recent research on project stakeholder management has also addressed empirically the behavioral strategies of stakeholders (Aaltonen et al., 2008; Beringer et al., 2013) and the corresponding dynamic responses of project organizations over the project life-cycle (e.g., Missonier and Loufrani-Fedida, 2014; Tryggestad et al., 2013; Vaagaasar, 2011). However, also within this stream of research much of the focus has been devoted to single stakeholders and their independent influences instead of systematically addressing and capturing the impacts from entire stakeholder environments. Consequently, there is room for synthetizing the different fragmented pieces of project stakeholder knowledge into a more holistic analysis framework that would provide a more complete understanding of the concept of project stakeholder environment and its key dimensions. More importantly, while the concept of project stakeholder environment has been treated highly superficially and without operationalization in project stakeholder research (Aaltonen, 2010), this holds true also for the more general stream of stakeholder research. There the dominant mode to approach stakeholder environments has been through the hub-and-spoke model (Freeman, 1984) that emphasizes the management of single, independent stakeholders (Neville and Menguc, 2006).

In this study we conceptualize project stakeholder environment through the concept of project stakeholder landscape. Our aim is to contribute to project stakeholder research through proposing and conceptualizing a novel concept of project stakeholder landscape and to develop a framework for characterizing, analyzing and classifying project stakeholder landscapes. Based on the above, the following research question has been formulated: How can project stakeholder landscape be conceptualized and what are its key dimensions? To answer the research question a systematic literature review is conducted: we integrate the fragmented findings and frameworks of project stakeholders from previous pieces of literature into an umbrella typology that may help scholars in making sense of a project's stakeholder landscape and to support project managers to evaluate the stakeholder landscapes of their projects and adjust their management approaches accordingly. In this study, the project stakeholder landscape is considered to cover both the internal and external stakeholder environment of the project. Internal stakeholders are the stakeholders that are formally members of the project coalition and, hence, usually support the project (Winch, 2004). They are often referred to as primary stakeholders (Cleland, 1998) or business actors (Cova and Salle, 2005). Such stakeholders have a formal, official or contractual relationship with the organization. External project stakeholders, in turn, are not formal members of the project coalition but may affect or be affected by the project. Such groups are often referred to as non-business stakeholders (Cova and Salle, 2005) or secondary stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995).

The study is grounded on contingency thinking of project management (Bosch-Rekveldt et al., 2011; Geraldi et al., 2011; Maylor et al., 2008; Shenhar, 2001; Shenhar and Dvir, 1996; Vidal and Marle, 2008). It therefore adopts the perspective that different projects face different types of stakeholder landscapes and that management methods should be adapted to take into account the characteristics of the stakeholder landscape. Although there is growing evidence on the role and influence of different

types of project stakeholder environments in, e.g., project strategy formation (Artto et al., 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Vuori et al., 2013), the most prominent contingency models for project management (Shenhar, 2001; Shenhar and Dvir, 1996; Shenhar and Dvir, 2007) tend to highlight the effects of internal and technical factors, thus downplaying the influences from the stakeholder environment (Geraldi et al., 2011; Jensen et al., 2006). Hence, we extend the contingency thinking, and particularly recently emerged complexity thinking of project management, by focusing on the stakeholder perspective: we review systematically existing project stakeholder management literature to identify salient dimensions and sub-factors that characterize stakeholder landscapes and therefore affect the way projects should be managed. By developing the comprehensive framework, we may also start theorizing about how the identified key dimensions relate to the challenge of managing project stakeholders.

The paper is organized as follows. We begin by providing a short introduction into general stakeholder thinking and stakeholder thinking in projects in particular, in order to build an understanding of the key concepts and to motivate our research on project stakeholder landscapes. Next, the methodology concerning the building of the conceptual framework is presented. We then synthesize our findings into a comprehensive multi-dimensional framework of project stakeholder landscapes. This is followed by discussion section and conclusions with areas for further research.

2. Introduction to project stakeholder thinking

Understanding stakeholders, their influences and devising engagement strategies based on analyses has become one of the key capabilities within project-based firms (Morris, 2013; PMI, 2013). The basic idea of stakeholder theory is that an organization has relationships with many constituent groups and that it can engender and maintain the support of these groups by considering and balancing their relevant interests (Freeman, 1984; Jones and Wicks, 1999). Overall, a central purpose of stakeholder theory is to enable managers to understand and, subsequently, manage stakeholders more strategically. Stakeholder management is at the very heart of project management: projects as temporary endeavors affect and are influenced by a number of diverse organizations or individuals and are very much reliant on their contributions, skills and capabilities. Freeman's landmark book (1984) on the strategic management of stakeholders was followed by Cleland's (1986) nascent work on project stakeholder management, where he attempted to fit the central ideas of stakeholder management to the context of temporary organizations. Over the years, the stakeholder theory stream has evolved into a legitimized organization theory, building very much on the foundational ideas of Freeman and other strategy scholars. Central contributions within the field of academic stakeholder theory literature include, among others, the stakeholder salience framework by Mitchell et al. (1997); Frooman's (1999) categorization of stakeholder influence strategies, Rowley's (1997) work on stakeholder networks and firms' response strategies, Savage et al. (1991) work on stakeholder management strategies, stakeholder lifecycle models by Jawahar and McLaughlin (2001) and research