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Applying institutional theories to managing megaprojects☆

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Abstract

This paper contributes to Rodney Turner's initiative to develop a theory of project management from practice. Organizational scholars studying strategy suggest that more attention needs to be paid to practices involved in organizing, as well as the institutional contexts in which these practices are embedded. Taking a cue from strategy-in-practice approaches, it is proposed that institutional theories can be used to address some questions that have not been answered adequately regarding megaprojects. Institutional theories also seem to be gaining the attention of scholars investigating large, global, infrastructure projects as reported in engineering, management and construction journals. Increasingly, it is evident that the problem areas attached to these projects stretch beyond technical issues: they must be considered as socio-technical endeavours embedded in complex institutional frames. The authors suggest that studying how to deal with institutional differences in the environment of megaprojects has both theoretical and practical implications.
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1. Executive summary

Professor Rodney Turner has contributed to the theory and practice of project management in his seminal works. In contributing to the Festschrift intended to honour Professor's Turners' work in project management this paper makes a contribution to the theory of project management by investigating how institutional theories can be applied to better management of projects, with a specific focus on megaprojects.

Bent Flyvbjerg argues that megaprojects are a completely different breed of projects and have to be managed differently from conventional projects. Following his lead we argue that Megaprojects are large-scale sociotechnical undertakings that are complex and embedded in institutional frames. Hence, as pointed out by some scholars who have investigated global infrastructure projects, in organizing these projects institutional work should precede technical work. Prominent project management scholars have also been advocating project management researchers pay attention to institutional theories to take into account the broader environment in which projects are situated.

In this paper we argue that, in line with the field of strategy, where more attention is being paid to institutional contexts of practice, institutional theory provides a valuable framework for thinking about organizing megaprojects. We further suggest

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that to overcome some of the obstacles to successfully manage these projects in order to deliver the benefits they are expected to deliver, agencies involved in conceiving, developing and implementing megaprojects are often, whether they realize it or not, often institutional entrepreneurs because they are shaping the context in which megaprojects are enacted. We attend to the regulative, normative and cognitive dimensions of institutional theories applied to institutional conflicts that are inevitable during the life cycle of a megaproject. By providing examples of institutional arrangements from a sample of megaprojects we show how such arrangements have dealt with the environmental complexities faced by megaprojects.

After discussing the impact of institutional theories on megaprojects we develop a research agenda from this perspective listing not only key but also under-addressed research questions in the megaproject literature. We also demonstrate how project management researchers can use innovative methods, using discourse analysis as an example, to carry out institutionally framed research.

After proposing the use of an institutional lens will for addressing certain challenges faced by megaprojects we invite researchers to address some of the research gaps identified in the paper. By doing so, we argue, they will be better able to contribute to the successful delivery of megaprojects by taking into account their social, organizational and political legitimacy.

2. Introduction

This paper is a contribution to the Festschrift to mark Professor Rodney Turner's twenty-five years of contribution as Editor of the *International Journal of Project Management*. Under his watch, it has become a leading journal in the field. In considering his seminal work on 'Managing the project-based organization', we include a discussion of two of his major contributions to the project management literature — project-based management (Turner, 1999) and management of large projects and programmes (Turner, 2004). By linking megaprojects and institutional theory, we will add to his quest to develop a theory of project management. As readers of this journal may recall, Professor Turner published four editorials in 2006 raising a series of premises and dilemmas entailed in developing a theory of project management: questions were raised about the nature of project management (Turner, 2006a); the nature of project governance and project management (Turner, 2006b); the functions of project management (Turner, 2006c), and the nature of the functions of project management (Turner, 2006d).

We start this paper by describing both megaprojects and institutional theory before addressing *why* we think institutional theory is useful in studying megaprojects, with a brief literature review. We then ask *what* particular aspects of institutional theory could be useful for research into megaprojects through a discussion on some key features of relevance to this paper. Next, we explain *how* institutional theory could be useful, with examples of institutional arrangements used in some megaprojects. We then focus on a few aspects of megaprojects worth investigating using an institutional theory lens, and propose a few research questions. Finally, we discuss *how* adopting methods used by institutional researchers could be beneficial to study megaprojects.

3. Innovating theory in project management

Turner (2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d) has observed that the statement 'that there is not yet a theory of project management' is false; because in his own practitioner-oriented work an embryonic theory may be found. More explicitly, in an earlier paper by Turner and Müller (2003) a statement of what the premises of that theory might be is attempted, cast in fairly static and economistic terms: 'If the project is viewed as a temporary production function, for assigning resources to the implementation of change objectives, it delineates each project, and suggests why it should be of a certain size. Further it differentiates projects from programmes and portfolios of projects' (p. 7). Doubtless, there is some mileage in thinking of a project as a production function — but not a great deal. In economics, a production function relates physical output of a production process to physical inputs or factors of production. The absence of purchase of this definition should be evident: it is output oriented; the output is defined in physical terms, as are the inputs. In other words, the project is a classical 'black box'. Sauer and Reich (2007) respond to Rodney Turner's attempts to propose a theory of project management by stating that while normative research can produce a theory that could be valued by practitioners, it will be necessary to consider a number of theories that accurately 'reflects on what actually happens and what actually makes a difference' (p. 1).

Inputs and outputs hardly define projects, except in limited, functional terms. Beyond these, projects are defined by their social construction by those who sponsor, fund, make, contest and use them. Projects are also defined by the dreams and nightmares they enact, as well as the illusions and obdurate realities with which they come into conflict. Project processes and their institutionalization, their coming to be and passing away, and the institutional traces they build, remember, forget and sometimes leave behind — above all, it is these that define projects. Megaprojects should be seen as sites of conflicting institutional logics brought to bear on their processes as the social and material constructors attending to them bring their life worlds to bear on the processes undertaken and forgone. Logics are the "organizing principles which inform actors in a domain of activity how they are to behave" (Van Gestel and Hillebrand, 2011, p. 232). In recent approaches to strategy and organizations, there is widespread consensus that we need to pay more attention to the practices involved in organizing, and the institutional contexts in which these practices are embedded. Institutional theory is a valuable framework for thinking about organizing megaprojects. Projects in general and megaprojects in particular are engagements in which considerable institutional work is required for their accomplishment, often in ways that challenge some logics and predicates certain institutional work.

The idea that projects should be seen in part in institutional terms is not entirely novel for the project management world: the idea that 'institutional management' should precede 'technical management' has been promoted by scholars writing about

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