

Title

**Navigating Stakeholder Tensions in Infrastructure Projects: A
Processual Perspective on Alignment, Articulation, and Evolving
Success Perceptions**

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Abstract (146 words)

This study explores how stakeholder tensions shape the perceived success of major infrastructure projects. Drawing on process and paradox theories, it argues that tensions - stemming from institutional contradictions, diverging expectations, and shifting stakeholder priorities - are not mere obstacles but structuring forces that evolve throughout the project lifecycle. Building on previous research on project development performance, this paper focuses on the execution phase, examining how tensions mediate the relationship between project articulation and stakeholder alignment. Using a longitudinal case study of a major North American infrastructure project, the study mobilizes interviews, media content, and institutional documents. Preliminary findings highlight three emergent tension patterns: temporal misalignment, competing accountability regimes, and ambiguities in participatory governance. These tensions significantly influence governance strategies and success perceptions over time. This developmental paper contributes to process-oriented project management literature and proposes an adaptive, stakeholder-driven lens for evaluating success in complex projects.

Developmental Paper (revised)

Introduction

This study explores the role of stakeholder tensions in shaping the perceived success of major infrastructure projects, analyzing how these tensions evolve over time from project development to execution. Stakeholder tensions arise from competing interests, institutional contradictions, and diverging expectations in complex, pluralistic environments (Denis et al., 2010; Clegg et al., 2018). We position this research within the ongoing debate on success evaluation in project management, extending our previous empirical work evaluating the success of project development phases (Ben Abdallah et al., 2022). In that prior study, a process-based framework was developed to measure megaproject development performance through three quantitative indicators.

The current paper advances this framework by shifting the focus to the execution phase and positioning stakeholder tensions as a dynamic and structuring force that mediates the evolving perception of success. From a paradox theory perspective (Smith & Lewis, 2011), these tensions are not merely obstacles to be resolved but persistent and dynamic forces that influence project trajectories and stakeholder perceptions. Traditional project management approaches have largely focused on static success criteria, such as cost, time, and scope, overlooking how tensions shape subjective evaluations of success across different project phases (Morris, 2013; Winch, 2012). However, recent studies suggest that tensions are inherent to large-scale projects and that their evolution - even if they intensify, are temporarily suppressed, or are productively leveraged - directly affects how success is interpreted by different stakeholders over time (Schad et al., 2016; Wiewiora & Desouza, 2022).

Conceptual framework

These tensions manifest across several dimensions, including strategic versus operational priorities, stability versus change, and centralized versus participatory decision-making (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Martinsuo, 2019). As projects transition from development to execution, these tensions often do not disappear but may shift in nature and intensity, requiring continuous negotiation and reinterpretation of project outcomes. By adopting a processual perspective, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how tensions evolve and how they shape the contested and dynamic nature of project success.

Stakeholder tensions emerge in major infrastructure projects as a result of conflicting interests and structural contradictions (Clegg et al., 2018). These tensions are particularly pronounced in pluralistic environments, where diverse actors - including policymakers, contractors, regulators, and communities - must align around a shared project vision (Denis et al., 2010). However, alignment is rarely straightforward, as stakeholder priorities shift over time, shaped by political, economic events, and institutional pressures (Martinsuo, 2019). A processual perspective recognizes that these tensions do not simply dissipate as the project progresses. Instead, they shift in nature and intensity, requiring continuous negotiation and reinterpretation of project outcomes (Brunet et al., 2021; Sergi et al., 2020).

Research has identified several key dimensions of stakeholder tensions that persist throughout the project lifecycle (Schad et al., 2016): strategic vision vs. operational constraints where long-term institutional and political goals often conflict with short-term cost, schedule, and technical limitations (Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Flyvbjerg, 2017; Rothengatter, 2019); stability vs. flexibility: while project articulation ensures clarity and predictability, excessive rigidity can hinder adaptation to emerging challenges. Conversely, prioritizing stakeholder alignment through iterative adjustments can create governance ambiguities and decision-making delays (Brunet & Aubry, 2016); and centralized control vs. participatory governance: while strong, top-down decision-making fosters efficiency and coordination, increasing demands for stakeholder inclusion and participatory governance can slow approvals and introduce governance complexities (Olander, 2007; Henisz et al., 2014). These tensions are not anomalies but rather structuring forces that actively shape project governance and stakeholder interactions (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Cunha & Putnam, 2019). Their management—or mismanagement—directly influences how success is perceived by different actors across the project lifecycle.

To understand how tensions shape project success perceptions, we focus on two interdependent dimensions:

- Stakeholder alignment: which refers to the degree to which diverse actors converge around a shared understanding and commitment to project objectives (Missonier & Loufrani-Fedida, 2014; Gilchrist et al., 2018).
- Project articulation: which captures the structural clarity and coherence of a project's governance, execution frameworks, and strategic direction (O'Leary & Williams, 2012; Winch, 2012).

These two dimensions do not evolve independently, as their interplay is not linear or deterministic but rather contingent on evolving tensions that persist throughout the project lifecycle. The relationship between alignment and articulation is not static - it is shaped by persistent tensions that evolve as projects move from development to execution (Denicol et al., 2020). A processual perspective challenges the notion that stakeholder alignment and project articulation remain stable, fixed, or entirely resolvable (Sergi et al., 2020). Instead, these dimensions are subject to continuous negotiation, reinterpretation, and transformation as projects evolve (Clegg et al., 2018; Schad et al., 2016). While strong articulation provides a clear governance framework, it may also introduce rigidity, making it difficult to accommodate evolving stakeholder expectations (Wiewiora & Desouza, 2022). Conversely, efforts to align stakeholders through participatory mechanisms may dilute strategic clarity, leading to ambiguous governance structures (Eskerod & Jepsen, 2013).

These tensions do not simply dissipate or resolve themselves over time; instead, they evolve, shift, and resurface in different forms across project phases (Schad et al., 2016). The way these tensions are navigated, leveraged, or exacerbated directly influences how stakeholders perceive project success—not as an objective, fixed outcome but as a negotiated and evolving construct (Morris, 2013; Sergi et al., 2020). From this perspective,

success is not a fixed outcome but rather a moving target, evolving as stakeholder tensions reshape governance priorities (Flyvbjerg, 2017). First, success is pluralistic: different stakeholders interpret success differently, depending on their institutional position, political interests, and evolving constraints (Denis et al., 2010; Henisz et al., 2014). Second, success is contingent on tension management: projects that acknowledge and navigate tensions are more likely to sustain legitimacy and stakeholder engagement, while those that attempt to suppress tensions often face escalating conflicts and contested outcomes (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Research question and methodology

Given these complexities, our ongoing study explores a critical question: how do stakeholder tensions mediate the relationship between project articulation and stakeholder alignment, and how do they shape evolving perceptions of success in major infrastructure projects? As our research progresses, we aim to contribute to the shift from traditional, static measures of success toward a more processual and stakeholder-driven understanding of project performance. By integrating insights from process theory and paradox theory, we seek to develop a novel analytical lens to examine stakeholder dynamics in complex projects

To explore these questions, our study employs a longitudinal single-case study approach (Yin, 2009) to analyze a major infrastructure project in North America. The case was selected for its revelatory potential and its rich documentation. In fact, North America presents a compelling context for this study due to its various project governance frameworks, diverse stakeholder environments, and increasing public accountability expectations which enable in-depth process tracing of stakeholder tensions over time.

While we recognize the limitations of single-case generalizability, the selected project's complexity, regulatory scrutiny, and socio-political salience provide a powerful window into the dynamics of stakeholder alignment and governance. Our research follows best practices in project management, drawing on principles from the PMBOK® Guide (PMI, 2017), as well as national-level project governance directives that regulate the management of major public infrastructure projects. These institutional frameworks provide critical guidelines for stakeholder engagement, risk management, and decision-making processes, which are essential for understanding how tensions emerge and evolve over time (Samset & Volden, 2016).

Data collection was conducted in two phases, integrating multiple sources to enhance validity through triangulation (Denzin, 2012). We employed semi-structured interviews, media analysis - including a corpus of 130 press articles published between summer 2021 and winter 2025 - and social media content analysis to track stakeholder discourse and engagement over time. Additionally, we examined institutional documents such as policy reports, project governance frameworks, and oversight committee reports to contextualize the formal mechanisms shaping stakeholder interactions. This multi-method approach

enabled us to establish a timeline of key events, analyze evolving narratives surrounding the project, examine communication strategies, and document how institutional and regulatory constraints influenced stakeholder tensions.

In total, 14 interviews were conducted across two waves with professionals occupying diverse roles, including project directors, engineers, and public relations officers. The first wave, conducted between 2019 and 2020, comprised nine interviews, while the second wave, carried out between 2023 and 2024, included five additional interviews. These interviews explored key themes such as stakeholder involvement, resource mobilization, sequencing of activities, knowledge transfer, project conceptualization, negotiation and commitments, as well as major challenges - including cost overruns and delays - and the lessons learned throughout the process. Additional data collection is planned to further refine our understanding of how stakeholder tensions evolve over time and influence the perception of project success.

Preliminary findings

Our preliminary findings suggest that tensions are not merely obstacles but structuring forces that evolve over time, influencing governance strategies and stakeholder engagement. In particular, our early insights indicate that adaptive tension management plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of project success, as it enables project actors to respond dynamically to shifting constraints and emerging issues. While project articulation tends to be well established, achieving full stakeholder alignment remains challenging due to ongoing tensions, often intensified by regulatory and social uncertainties. At this stage, the analysis is still ongoing and our insights remain preliminary. The themes outlined below represent the first analytical layer of a broader interpretive process that is still under development. As such, they should be understood as exploratory, guiding the next steps of our study rather than constituting definitive findings.

Specifically, three key themes emerged from our interviews:

1. Temporal misalignment between political mandates and technical schedules;
2. Competing accountability regimes between public stakeholders and private contractors;
3. Ambiguities in participatory processes, which both empower communities and complicate formal governance.

These themes reflect how tensions manifest and evolve in ways that influence both process and perception of project legitimacy.

Conclusion and Contributions

By exploring project success through the lens of stakeholder tensions and their evolution over time, this ongoing research paves the way for further investigations. As our study progresses, it seeks to build a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how tensions

emerging during the development phase influence project outcomes and inform strategic adjustments to improve stakeholder engagement. These insights could contribute to the long-term success of major infrastructure projects by emphasizing the need for adaptive management. Moving forward, we aim to extend this framework to examine how tensions evolve across different stages of the project lifecycle, from development to execution and beyond, providing a more nuanced perspective on their role in shaping perceived success.

Theoretically, this research aligns with the "Third Wave" of project management, which emphasizes a processual approach that foregrounds the dynamic evolution of tensions rather than static success criteria (Sergi et al., 2020). As our study advances, we seek to extend the literature on complex projects by moving beyond traditional models that emphasize universal success factors (Eskerod & Jepsen, 2013). Instead, it highlights the contingent and negotiated nature of project success, emphasizing how tensions—rather than being resolved—persist and evolve throughout the project lifecycle.

Practically, this ongoing research offers valuable insights into the management of stakeholder interactions in complex projects. By acknowledging tensions as inherent and persistent, it challenges conventional approaches that assume stakeholder alignment as a prerequisite for success. Instead, our study explores how success emerges through the navigation and interpretation of tensions over time. As our analysis progresses, we aim to develop a more dynamic framework for project practitioners, shifting away from rigid cost-schedule-performance indicators toward a processual and stakeholder-driven evaluation of project outcomes. This evolving perspective highlights the need for adaptive management strategies that account for the fluid and contested nature of success in large-scale projects.

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