

Innovating the way we collaborate: How interorganizational routines form at a backdrop of conflicting goals and structures

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Key words: routine formation, interorganizational collaboration, grand societal challenges, innovation

1 Introduction

There is a widespread consensus that organizations need to *collaboratively* change their behavior to tackle the grand societal challenges of our time (Ferraro et al., 2015; George et al., 2016). This especially affects the delivery of public services, like clean drinking water and accessible infrastructures (Couture et al., 2021; J. Howard-Grenville et al., 2014; Porter et al., 2020), which requires new forms of collaboration and coordination between private and public organizations. Yet, to date, we lack understanding of the process through which novel forms of collaboration are established between multiple organizations.

Routines are known to play a major role in interorganizational collaboration (Zollo et al., 2002), as they enable countering conflict and opportunism while leveraging complementarities and synergies. Surprisingly few attempts have been made focused on understanding the *formation* of interorganizational routines (e.g. Bygballe et al., 2016; Zollo et al., 2002). The formation of such routines is theoretically interesting because interorganizational collaborations are ridden with conflicting goals and value tradeoffs. When operating in an interorganizational context, none of the actors involved can oversee all interdependencies and consequences of their actions. Especially when routines are novel and replace existing, stable forms of collaboration, as is the case with developing new forms of collaboration in response to complex societal problems, it is likely more difficult for patterning and stability to emerge than in less complex settings.

We study the process of routine formation between a heterogeneous set of public and private organizations in the context of water management. Preventing land from flooding and drought is one of the challenges that currently requires innovative ways of collaboration between public and private organizations in the public services sector. The high demand for

clean drinking water in combination with developments such as climate change require organizations to flexibly respond to volatile environmental factors.

We take a routine dynamics perspective (Feldman et al., 2016; Feldman & Pentland, 2003) that views routines as “repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions carried out by multiple actors” (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 95). We particularly focus on a complex interorganizational collaboration in which novel routines are formed to address the following research question: “*How does the process of routine formation unfold when initiating new forms of interorganizational collaborations that radically depart from existing practices in the public services context?*”

In public services, collaborations have traditionally been organized through projects that rely on role-based coordination (Bechky, 2006; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009). The obligation of public organizations to publicly tender complicates their ability to build long-term collaborative relationships with private organizations, like contractors and engineering firms. This tender regulation aims at maintaining a level playing field in procuring a project with equal changes for all bidders, but in practice leads to ever changing team compositions. Moreover, it introduces a short-term orientation in the collaboration that limits parties’ ability to joint learning and hampers addressing complex societal problems. Therefore, innovation in a public services context is difficult as project-based collaborations invoke a short-term orientation and limits opportunities for joint learning (Bygballe & Ingemansson, 2014).

Changing interorganizational relationships from project-based routines towards long-term collaboration requires breaking with existing routines and establishing or adapting new ones (Davies & Brady, 2000; Hartmann & Bresnen, 2011; Hedborg et al., 2020). We study how public organizations introduce an innovative form of collaboration over time to understand how interorganizational routines form, recognizing that new action patterns can only emerge when doings and sayings at specific times and in specific spaces become patterned and recognizable over time (Feldman et al., 2016).

2 Theoretical background

In this paper, we extend research on how organizations adopt new ways of organizing. Most prior research has studied the adoption of ‘best practices’ or templates, such as compliance tools (Bertels et al., 2016; D’Adderio, 2014), Six Sigma improvement (Canato et al., 2013), or surgical innovations (Edmondson et al., 2001). It is unlikely, however, that effective responses to complex societal challenges can be ‘imitated’ from others. Therefore, a deep

understanding is needed of how new forms of collaboration can become integrated within organizations in situ.

This requires us to unpack how emerging novel routines interact with existing routines (Cohendet & Simon, 2016; Deken et al., 2016) and relate to other organization structures (Bertels et al., 2016; J. A. Howard-Grenville, 2005; Rerup & Feldman, 2011). Feldman et al. (2016) note that the recognizable, repetitive action patterns that routines entail are temporal since the performance of a routine cannot occur indefinitely, and second, that these patterns can change from one performance to the next. When actors perform a routine similar to past performances, the so-called ostensive aspects are reinforced (Feldman, 2003). However, when actors perform a routine in a novel way, the repertoire of the performative aspect is extended, which in turn can reshape the ostensive aspect (Turner, 2014). Hence, we consider routines as generative systems constituted of performative and ostensive parts, which exhibit a pattern for accomplishing work (Rerup & Feldman, 2011).

According to Dionysiou & Tsoukas (2013), two inputs are faced when actors interact for the first time creating new routines. The first input relates to rules that help orient the actors towards the joint activity. Such rules or artifacts, like schemes, procedures or contracts, can shape and provide the context in which interorganizational routines develop (Bechky, 2006; Davies et al., 2018). Artifacts, in particular, may support retaining specific industry-wide norms and historical practices for future interactions and reflect established cycles of project work activities (DeFillippi & Sydow, 2016). The second input is the perceived uncertainty which significantly impacts how actors move towards workable levels of certainty (Dionysiou & Tsoukas, 2013). According to Sele & Grand (2016), all actors performing a routine hold the potential to modifying it. Eventually, however, for routines to come into being, shared understanding between the people who perform the task on the actions taken in a specific routine, is necessary (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002).

In essence, to deal with the uncertainty and reach shared understanding between actors, over time several 'interaction cycles' elapse (Dionysiou & Tsoukas, 2013). During these interaction cycles, actors exchange issues such as information, ideas, and previous experiences related to the situation. This communication helps to create shared understanding by connecting the people involved, who might as well have very different understandings about what needs to be done and how (Feldman & Rafaeli, 2002). In this study we will build

upon this theoretical model, examining how novel action patterns emerge and how patterning emerges between different organizations as a foundation for new interorganizational routines.

3 Research methods

We draw upon an in-depth field study using process research methods (Langley, 1999), as such an approach is well-suited for developing new theoretical insights on routine formation given that it is a dynamic process that unfolds over time. We selected a case where multiple organizations began experimenting with a new form of collaboration for the first time. While in most settings, existing partnering and collaboration routines have been established (such as procurement and alliance formation routines), in our setting, existing routines and practices could not be followed because the coveted form of collaborating opposed the status quo. Thus, this case provides a unique opportunity to study the formation of interorganizational routines between heterogeneous organizations.

Research setting

The organization selected for this study is Water Board (WB) Lambda, which is the executive organization that manages two water territories in the Netherlands. Historically, almost all regions in the Netherlands have been threatened by the sea and rivers and Dutch water management practices have been world leading. So-called Water Boards operate independently from the central and local government for managing, for example, rivers, canals, water collection, dikes, barriers, and locks to prevent flooding and erosion and ensure water quality. WB Lambda usually commissions work in the form of single projects to private contractors in the construction industry. However, with growing concerns about the availability of high-quality water, shrinking budgets, and a large part of their infrastructure requiring replacement in the coming years, there was a high sense of urgency to radically change how wastewater treatment plants have been designed, built, operated, and maintained. Traditional wastewater treatment plants are round cement bins that are built underground, being robust but also inflexible structures that require a lot of space. Such plants are difficult to maintain and inflexible in responding to environmental influences in water demand or supply. Through a development trajectory, WB Lambda came up with a modular water treatment unit that would enable them to respond to changing environmental factors. This unit is built above ground, is standardized and modular and enables WB Lambda to shift capacity in the region easily on demand.

To further develop this innovation, WB Lambda critically relied on other firms with complementary knowledge and skills in the water sector. WB Lambda envisioned a novel collaborative approach, to ensure more long-term relationship building and joint knowledge creation. Rather than selecting a contractor for each specific asset (e.g., each bucking)—the usual practice in public services—WB Lambda created five pools with each three contractors in mid-2018 to execute all works of a certain type for a period of four years, to facilitate joint knowledge creation and to reduce opportunistic behavior. WB Lambda, the contractors, and other supply chain parties (e.g., sub-contractors, suppliers, engineering firms) had only collaborated through one-off single projects, and thus could not rely on their previous experience for organizing these long-term collaborative partnerships.

We started collecting data in early 2022 and will continue to follow the process for another few years. We collect data from multiple data sources to identify patterns in the interorganizational interactions and follow how the collaboration unfolds over time. Our dataset comprises six months of real-time observations, including 24 weekly internal meetings of the WB Lambda, 12 progress meetings between the WB Lambda and one of the three contractors, and 6 internal meetings at the WB Lambda in which the collaborative approach is discussed among the management team. Second, we so far conducted 5 informal interviews to complement the observations and capture how different participants understand events and emerging action patterns (routines) in-depth, as well as to enhance our retrospective understanding of routine formation. Third, we collected documents, focusing on documentation providing more insight into collaborative relations, work practices, and governance structures. This also contains >150 evaluation forms on the proceedings of the collaboration that were filled in and discussed biweekly by WB Lambda the contractors. These evaluation forms were created from the start of the collaboration in 2018 and onwards. All observations and interviews have been elaborated into field notes and transcripts respectively. Together with an extensive set of other documentation, such as tender information, meeting reports, and presentations, all data were imported in Atlas.ti for systematic analysis.

Analytic approach

We followed data analysis techniques in the process research tradition—narrative analysis and temporal bracketing specifically (Langley, 1999)—to identify emerging patterns in the interorganizational collaboration over time. We are currently creating case histories (events

lists) and writing narratives to capture routine formation over time. Following the approach of Dionysiou & Tsoukas (2013), we isolated and analyzed the emerging patterns in the process of reaching shared understanding on collaborative tasks and activities at hand. We applied a temporal bracketing strategy, aiming to study how dynamics in the interorganizational collaboration at different levels in the organization interact with the emergence of routines over time (Langley, 1999). This enabled us “to see how context at one point leads to actions that reconstitute context in subsequent time periods” (Bizzi & Langley, 2012) and obtain a more thorough understanding of how the patterning (routines) came into being in the interorganizational collaboration.

The current four-year contract is ending and WB Lambda has started the tender procedure for a successive long-term collaboration. In the first cycle, the contract lasted four year and included three contractors. Partly thanks to positive experiences with the first long-term cycle, the contract in the second cycle will last for eight years and include four contractors. It is expected that several of the contractors involved in the first cycle will be included in the second cycle as well, partly complemented by other contractors. Where organizations that were involved in the first cycle already have some experience with the repetitive and long-term collaboration, the newcomers have not. We expect that this setting can provide us with more insights in how WB Lambda and the contractors evolve from an espoused vision on a new collaborative approach to addressing the complex societal problems. Our initial analysis particularly alerted us to the interaction between the emergence of new roles and emerging routines. We will focus on how both WB Lambda as the contractors enact the interorganizational collaboration and coordination against a backdrop of industry-wide expectations on roles and entrenched processes.

4 Preliminary results

In this section, we describe two routines that we identified in the first months of data collection: the *staffing routine* and the *project start-up routine*, which seem to invoke both heritage of established, ‘old’ organizational roles, as well as novel actions. We first explain how WB Lambda arranged the new form of organizing, whereafter we elaborate on the two routines in more depth.

In preparing for the envisaged novel form of collaboration, WB Lambda took care to design multiple routines aligned with their vision on how to organize wastewater treatment in a radically different way with assets that could be flexibly allocated to regions based on

fluctuating demand. For example, they designed standard contracts and procedures to assign follow-up projects to one of the contractors. Part of these procedures is the manner in which projects are divided between contractors: either based on competition or in collaboration. With these procedures, WB Lambda tried to structure the interorganizational collaboration by designing new routines to reflect their innovative vision. In fact, the ‘competition-based procedure’ was very similar to the standard tendering procedure often used in public infrastructure, and in practice their efforts reinforced the very client–supplier roles they tried to break free from: these procedures invoked traditional project-based interactions and unilateral governance. This envisioned interorganizational routine of WB Lambda was not rooted in shared understandings of their practical use, which proved a deal-breaker for being used in the collaboration with contractors. The ‘collaboration-based procedure’ on the other hand, could count on more support from the contractors’ side and was frequently used in practice. Both procedures were part of the contract documents, which provided in a wide range of possible procedures to follow. Where at the start of the collaboration was chosen for ‘known’ procedures which were close to old practices, as the collaboration proceeded the relatively unknown procedures were tried and succeeded.

In addition, we found that both for WB Lambda and the private contractors a range of existing organizational routines were affected by the new way of collaborating over time. Because the context (public services) and nature of the work (engineering work) did not change, existing norms and expectations slumbered through and affected parties’ attempts to innovate the way they collaborated. Since the different organizations did not interact in this constellation before, they heavily relied on their existing practices associated with engineering work and project management. This reaffirmed traditional role divisions—the very role divisions that actors were trying to change- hindered their ability to enact the new form of interorganizational collaboration. Roles weren’t adjusted to fit the novel collaborative form, and this espoused schema on how to act did not easily translate into actual routine performances that were aligned with the new vision. For example, employees normally acting as project manager, now had to fulfill the programme manager role as well - a role demanding for a broader view on project’s performance.

Patterning arose in the interorganizational relationship, both based upon preliminary designed processes and adjusted to the situation at hand. This process of forming routines was accompanied by surfacing mismatches and tensions between organizations. An example regards the *staffing routines* of one of the contractors. This contractor worked with a flexible

staff, hiring employees on peak moments, which caused a continuously changing workforce. Especially in the initial phases of the collaboration this changing workforce hindered building up knowledge and capabilities, thus countering the ambition to “store knowledge” for executing future work. A manager at the WB Lambda explains:

“Hiring parties does not matter as long as you always hire the same firm or team. Otherwise, you won’t get that learning ability and you always have to start from scratch with the team that you are going to work with”.

In one of their regular meetings, WB Lambda and the contractor evaluated their ongoing collaboration. They agreed on revising the contractor’s *staffing* routine to increase their ability to retain knowledge for future projects by gradually involving the same individuals for executing the work. As a result, the goals and practices associated with the traditional way of collaborating in single-projects were adapted to the new form of collaboration. For the good of the interorganizational collaboration, both parties were willing to make concessions in their work approach for the benefit of the interorganizational collaboration. Hence, in this emerging pattern we observed how parties explicitly aligned divergent goals that are linked to the revenue models of their respective organizations. Besides, we found that implementing the new collaborative approach began overshadowing the parties’ intention to address the complex problem of including societal challenges such as circularity in project work in the long term due to the continuous effort it took to enact the novel form of collaboration in practice.

We also noticed the surfacing of mismatches between the espoused new way of collaborating and multiple existing intra-organizational routines. Such mismatches triggered organizations to create new actions over time. In other instances, mismatches triggered breakdowns, particularly in parts of the organizations that directly had been involved in the collaboration. Departments with more distance from project-based working, such as purchasing and contracting departments, seemed to adapt earlier to become aligned with the new way of interorganizational collaboration. Moreover, it appeared that the emerging interorganizational routines were quickly exchanged for traditional behavior, as explained by a manager of WB Lambda in relation to the procedures to divide projects among the contractors:

‘As it turned out, the moment you start organizing competitions within the [new collaboration] [to divide the work], the contractors reverted to ‘old’ behavior. You will then take price elements into account [competition based on price is common practice when

awarding the contract], and as a result all tricks are used [by the contractors] to score as low as possible'.

Such slippage into existing patterns triggered knock-on effects, going against the envisaged new form of collaboration.

We observed how an existing pattern of actions was adjusted to fit the new, long-term work approach in the *project start-up routine*. At the beginning of the four-year collaboration, a project start-up pattern similar to the usual one-off project routines in the construction sector was followed. As per the 'old' routine, when a client and a contractor sign the work agreement, the contractor starts the design and preparation activities. At one point in time, however, in four out of five contractor pools, the contractors started with design and preparation activities before the contract was signed. Hence, the pattern of activities changed and a new project start-up routine was enacted. This new routine included (1) WB Lambda communicating in pool of contractors that new project is coming, (2) a 'project division' meeting takes place, in which one of the contractors is selected for the project, (3) the selected contractor and WB Lambda have successive meetings in which first design and preparation activities are jointly conducted, (4) somewhere in the first month, the contract is signed.

This new work method came about as follows. The contractors received multiple projects on a repetitive basis, over a long period of time. Suddenly, instead of first signing the contract for the follow-up project, the contractors just started with preparation activities. This new approach responds to the mismatch of formalized arrangements on the bases of the 'traditional' routine, not fitting the new, long term way of collaborating. Several causes were at the root of this change. First, a basis of trust was built in conducting multiple projects with the same organizations. The contractors were confident enough to start with their work, knowing that payment and signing the contract worked out. Second, the contractors indicated that the new order of activities eased their work. As part of the contract to be signed, the contractor has to prepare a price for the work. By starting with the design before the contract was signed, the contractors could prepare a more accurate price. Both the contractor as WB Lambda benefit from that: the contractor gets paid a fair price, whereas WB Lambda has fewer discussions about extra costs. Hence, the new routine decreased the level of uncertainty in subsequent work. Third, the new routine increased efficiency of the overall pattern of

actions. The contractor had more time to, among other things, anticipate the workforce capacity required and request offers from sub-contractors.

In one of the five contractor pools, the ‘old’ routine is still in place. In contrast to the other pools, few projects were forgiven: in four years, the contractors executed two or three projects each. The same type of contract underlies their collaboration, hence the ‘start conditions’ were similar. In the course of repeated interactions, or the absence of those, the project start up routine split into two different paths.

Tensions arise when the promised project is called off before the contract is signed, but after the contractor starts with preparing the work. The contractor already spent work hours and reserved workforce capacity which he cannot invoice. Several of these moments occurred, of which is observed that traditional behavior, not in line with behavior the collaborative relationship steered for, slumbers through. Apparently, this heritage from the previous way of working has not been erased by the new routine. It must be observed that the contract with WB Lambda is not the only agreement the contractor is involved in: he may have other assignments for different clients where a traditional work approach is followed including short-term interactions. Whereas WB Lambda aligned their internal organization to the new way of working, the contractors cannot align their entire business model and internal processes to this one client.

5 Contributions

In this study, we investigate how multiple infrastructure organizations (both public and private) develop interorganizational routines when entering new long-term partnerships to facilitate public service delivery in the context of wastewater treatment plants. Preliminary results illustrate the continuous effort required from actors to form a new routine aligned with their new collaboration vision. As such it addresses several research gaps.

At first, the study contributes to literature on routine dynamics by unpacking how interorganizational routines come into being over time (Feldman et al., 2016). This complements existing routines research that has shown how routines are imported from other settings (e.g. Bertels et al., 2016; D’Adderio, 2014) and how endogenous dynamics introduce new actions and patterns (Deken et al., 2016; Goh & Pentland, 2019) to the process of forming novel routines, like Pentland & Feldman (2008) and Rerup & Feldman (2011). In particular, the research shows that the patterns of interactions are highly influenced by existing goals and understandings when novel routines are formed *and* performed. Although

the WB Lambda took great care to design routines and create a vision on the innovative form of collaborating that compelled other parties to participate, several of these envisaged routines were never performed let alone became patterned.

Second, the study contributes to literature on interorganizational collaborations for grand societal challenges by enriching the understanding of long-term partnerships between public and private organizations. In a project-organizing context, both scholars and practitioners are seeking for ways to leverage continuous relationships (Manning & Sydow, 2011) to address urgent societal challenges (Couture et al., 2021; J. Howard-Grenville & Rerup, 2016) through novel forms of collaboration (Hilbolling et al., 2021; Martinsuo & Hoverfält, 2018). Our study shows how long-term engagement between public and private parties increase efficiency of work and facilitates innovative solutions required to deal with societal challenges, however transitioning towards a completely new way of working requires great effort for actors involved, meaning that inclusion of transcending ambitions becomes a background activity for as long parties are figuring out the new work approach.

Third, the study contributes to the role of artifacts in interorganizational routine formation (D'Adderio, 2014), by highlighting the effects artifacts have in adjusting patterns against a backdrop of existing structures. In this regard, Pentland & Feldman (2008) explained how the design of artifacts does not necessarily results in patterns of action. In one way, our results support the argument of Pentland & Feldman (2008) adding the 'competition-based procedure' for dividing projects to the list of pre-designed artefacts with lack of situated action. Here, the artifacts were similar to known interorganizational processes and quickly replaced by novel initiatives. However, the routine that was enacted instead was *also* designed on beforehand and part of contractual arrangements between organizations, reducing uncertainty in the interorganizational relationship and functioning as blueprint for enacting processes. The pre-defined routine provided guidance for both organizations in managing the new way of working together.

Now that the first cycle of the 4-year collaboration at WB Lambda is nearly completed, a second cycle is currently being prepared, which we will continue to follow to understand how further variations are introduced and how these become either retained or ephemeral. We are particularly interested to explore whether the routines formed in the initial 4-year collaboration will also become patterned in other collaborations (with other external parties for other innovative water management solutions) that are currently being set up by WB

Lambda. In a future paper, we will further unpack the process of surfacing mismatches and subsequent aligning and show how both intra- and interorganizational dynamics affect the formation process of interorganizational routines.

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