

# **INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES OF LONG-TERM PROGRAMMATIC INFRASTRUCTURE COLLABORATIONS**

Programmatic collaborations in which public and private parties collaborate for series of projects over a longer period are increasingly applied in the construction sector as an approach to address societal challenges such as innovation and sustainability. In a sector used to project-based collaborations, the implementation of such a programmatic approach comes with several challenges. In this paper, the implications of programmatic collaboration for governing the interorganizational relationships are explored by means of a comparative case study of two Dutch infra-structure programmes. The results imply that there is a strong need to adapt current, project-based governance structures to truly enable programmatic collaboration. In balancing contractual and relational aspects in procurement phase, it seems beneficial to include informal arrangements and allow for adjustments as the long-term contract progresses. Overall, expected benefits of a programmatic approach seem attractive, also because of the long-term collaborative benefits for learning and innovation.

Keywords: interorganizational collaboration, procurement, programme, governance, infrastructure.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Organizations need to collaboratively change their behavior to tackle the grand societal challenges of our time (Ferraro et al., 2015). This especially affects the delivery of public services, like clean drinking water and safe and accessible infrastructures (Couture et al., 2021; Howard-Grenville et al., 2014). However, the temporariness of construction projects causes continuous challenges to the required long-term collaboration between numerous stakeholders needed (Sydow & Braun, 2018). To avert such collaborative challenges, more and more programmatic initiatives started in the construction sector to stimulate project-transcending inter-organizational collaboration (Frederiksen et al., 2021).

In programmatic collaborations, actors enter a long-term relationship that spans multiple projects, enabling a more effective contribution to overarching challenges like innovation and sustainability (Pellegrinelli, 1997). Organizations in the construction industry, however, act against a backdrop of already established structures, especially focussed on the delivery of projects. When collaborative relations are extended to a project-transcending level, this has implications for the governance structure in place (Majchrzak et al., 2015) which need to become aligned to various new conditions (Martinsuo & Hoverfält, 2018). To date, we lack understanding on the implications of such strategic programmes on governance structures and governing the interorganizational relationship (Martinsuo et al., 2020).

To support the transition from project-based towards programmatic collaborations, a better understanding of this collaborative approach is required.

In this paper, we aim to shed light on the impact that a programmatic collaborative strategy has on the interorganizational governance of large infrastructural maintenance programmes. A comparative case study among two initiatives of Dutch public clients that introduced a project-transcending approach are studied. To this end, initial choices determining the collaborative framework are analysed and examined for its effects on governing the interorganizational relationship in practice. We especially studied how interorganizational governance impacts transitioning to a project transcending mode of collaboration in infrastructure maintenance.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Inter-organizational governance in programmes**

Inter-organizational governance can be described as the framework within which decisions regarding the inter-organizational collaboration are made (Garland, 2009), and functions as a control-mechanism to structure the exchange relationship (Jap & Ganesan, 2000). For the project-based infrastructure sector, used to short-term interactions between public client and market organizations, a programme approach requires significant changes to how such organizations operate (Martinsuo & Hoverfält, 2018). When collaborative relationships are extended to long-term affairs, the interorganizational governance structures change as well (Majchrzak et al., 2015). Yet, for the transition from projects to programmes, governance practices need to become aligned with various project-transcending principles.

The collaborative framework around public works, such as civil infrastructure, involve specific conditions resulting from procurement assumptions, particularly in client–contractor relationships (Kuitert et al., 2019). This procurement legislation shapes inter-organizational governance structures, as it defines the conditions under which the client–contractor collaboration takes place (Hällström et al., 2021; Volker & Hoezen, 2017). The nature of inter-organizational governance ranges from contractual towards relational (Roehrich et al., 2020). When governance is highly contractual, organizational structures are explicit and formal, with often complex contracts between organizations (De Pourcq & Verleye, 2021). Relational governance, on the other hand, supports trust, cognitive alignment and knowledge exchange (Poppo & Zenger, 2002; Zheng et al., 2008). Hence, in inter-organizational relationships commissioned by public clients, both contractual and relational aspects can be found.

According to Eriksson et al. (2019), procurement choices on the delivery system, partner selection method, incentive system and collaboration model can be combined in different ways to achieve the desired governance structure, ranging from highly contractual towards relational. The delivery system relates to the contract type used, and decides in what stages the contractor will be involved (Kadefors et al., 2020). The partner selection method can range from price-based selection towards a more qualitative approach, combining price aspects with 'softer' criteria (Eriksson & Laan, 2007). The incentive system describes how the contractor gets rewarded, for example based on a fixed-price system, profit-sharing, or incentive-based payment (Rose & Volker, 2013). Lastly, the collaboration model determines the intensity of the client–contractor relationship (Eriksson et al., 2019). These choices determine the structural conditions for collaborating and are important up-front decisions, which establish and direct conditions for governing and managing the collaboration (Hodge et al., 2017).

## **Governing the client-contractor relationship**

Organizations involved in inter-organizational collaborations have to explore the best way to govern the relationship, also after the initial conditions are set (De Pourcq & Verleye, 2021; Majchrzak et al., 2015). Governing is considered the ‘active’ form of governance, concerned with how decisions are coordinated and controlled (Winch, 2001). Although the interorganizational decision framework is set in the contracting phase, governing activities possibly reshapes pre-defined governance structures (Sanderson, 2012). Hence, interorganizational governance structures are dynamic and may change over time. DeFillippi & Sydow (2016) identified four mechanisms – responsibilities, routines, roles, and relationships – for governing inter-organizational relationships in programmes. Responsibilities represent the contract-based governance, roles and routines reflect administrative controls (e.g., work practice controls such as procedures), and relationships the social modes of governance.

In transitioning towards long-term programmatic collaborations, initial governance structures may be adjusted to governing activities in practice. For example, when public client and market organizations collaborate for a series of projects, contract-based responsibilities may need to be revised during the course of project work, based on past experiences or future expectations (DeFillippi & Sydow, 2016). In addition, roles are formed within an institutional environment in which firms operate with industry-wide expectations about how roles are performed within projects (Cacciatori & Prencipe, 2020; Steen et al., 2018), often included in the procurement stage to divide tasks and responsibilities. However, when collaborative practices change this might have implications for the role-structure as well (Bechky, 2006).

A need, therefore, exists to explore how strategic programmes are governed and fold out in inter-organizational relationships (Martinsuo et al., 2020). Previous research studied how a governance framework is translated in practice (e.g. Brunet, 2019) but most studies focussing on governance in relation to relationships between actors are executed in a project context (Derakhshan et al., 2019; Geraldi & Söderlund, 2018; Müller et al., 2015). We aim to gain more insight in inter-organizational governance on a programme level from the public client perspective. We particularly explore the interorganizational governance structures focussed on the delivery of repeated projects, and the implications of these conditions for governing the inter-organizational relationship.

## **RESEARCH CONTEXT AND APPROACH**

By means of a comparative case study (Rihoux, 2006), two long-term programmatic initiatives of Dutch clients in infrastructure have been examined. The cases selected for this study are A) the Water Treatment Programme (WTP) and B) the Safety Precautions Bridges Programme (SPBP). The Water Treatment Programme is a four-year programme initiated by a Dutch waterboard. The programme consists of five parcels in which all projects of a certain species - 1: multi-disciplinary construction of wastewater treatment plants, 2: plumbing and civil engineering, 3: pumping stations, 4: electrical engineering and 5: mechanical engineering - are clustered, for the overarching goal to purify wastewater and to keep surface water of a high quality. For each of the five parcels, three contractors are formally contracted under a framework agreement. Those three contractors are expected to execute all the upcoming projects of this type for the coming four years. The contractors are selected by a competitive tender procedure, in which collaborative requirements were the most important award criteria. The programme started in 2018 and will finish mid 2022.

The Safety Precautions Bridges Programme comprises a six-year programme initiated by a large Dutch municipality with more than 1000 bridges in their asset portfolio. The programme is focussed on providing prevention and intervention measures on bridges which pose an emergent safety risk. Two contractors are formally contracted by means of a framework agreement for a period of six years. The two contractors execute acute reinforcement or repair measures and life-extending interventions. The contractors are selected for the framework agreement by means of a competitive tender procedure in mid-2021. Details of both cases are summarized in Table 1.

*Table 1 Case details on pre-defined governance conditions*

	<i>Water Treatment Programme (WTP)</i>	<i>Safety Precautions Bridges Programme (SPBP)</i>
<i>Delivery system</i>	Framework agreements in combination with ECI approach	Framework agreement in combination with ECI approach
<i>Incentive system</i>	Past performance; gain sharing	Past performance
<i>Partner selection Method</i>	Quality/price ratio, price in a qualitative manner, purely focussed on the collaborative relationship	Quality/price ratio, including collaboration criteria and a price list for repeating objects in programme
<i>Collaboration model</i>	Intense; involving coaches, collaboration evaluations, management-involvement, weekly progress meetings	Intense; involving external coaches and progress meetings regarding the collaboration

## **Data collection and analysis**

Data collection took place in the first half of the year 2022. The data collection method was mixed (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010) containing (1) three months of weekly observations for both programmes, regarding internal meetings in which the contracts and collaboration with the contractors are discussed, and external project meetings between client and contractor, (2) 15 informal interviews with actors that fulfil a role from the client-side regarding the programmes, such as programme coordinators, contract managers, asset managers and project managers, and (3) document analysis, including the procurement documentation and contracts describing the framework within which the collaboration takes place.

Data analysis took place after and during data was collected. The cases were systematically analysed using the four procurement choices (Eriksson et al., 2019) and governing mechanisms (DeFillippi & Sydow, 2016) introduced in the theoretical background section. At first, tender and contract documentation enabled the researchers to uncover the choices made in the pre-procurement stage by the client. With this data, the underlying conditions of the client-contractor relationship could be identified. For example, regarding the partner selection method, in both cases the client designed a routine for dividing projects between the contractors on beforehand, which was communicated to the contractors in the tender documents. In parallel to the document analysis, the researchers conducted interviews and observations to reveal how the formalized bases for governance was enacted in practice while transitioning to the new work approach (Langley & Meziani, 2020), using the four governing mechanisms derived from DeFillippi & Sydow (2016) as themes to structure data analysis. Challenges in governing the interorganizational relationship were identified and related to the initial governance structure which underlies the client-contractor relationship. It was sought for typical events resulting from the programmatic manner of collaborating: on a repeated project bases with the same set of organizations

involved. For both cases, the developments most affected by the programmatic way of working were studied. Finally, tensions between governance and governing in a programmatic context were explored.

## RESULTS

Table 2 shows implications of the programmatic approach for governing the interorganizational client-contractor relationship, based on the governing mechanisms as defined in the theoretical background. These are discussed further below.

*Table 2 Governance in practice*

	<i>Programme Water Treatment (WTP)</i>	<i>Programme Safety Precautions Bridges (SPBP)</i>
<i>Roles</i>	Flexible contractor's staff lacking stable involvement of key-actors	Unclarity on roles and responsibilities at client side
<i>Routines</i>	Informal division of projects rather than based on contractual principles	Fair procedure regarding division of projects designed by the client
<i>Responsibilities</i>	Financial reservation for project cost overruns; contractor gains what is left after project finish	Prescribed use of third parties, resulting in a complex network of different organizations
<i>Relationship</i>	External coach to support the collaboration	Coherence between performance client and contractor

### Roles

In the WTP, from the client-side roles are performed by a fixed group of actors, meaning that the same team is involved for each project of a certain type. Whereas the client coordinated employment on their 'own' side, at the contractors side one works with a flexible staff by hiring personnel. In enacting roles in practice, several challenges occur. One example is that the level of project-transcending learning is low. The WTP contract manager explains: "Hiring parties does not matter if you always hire the same firm or team. Otherwise, you will not get that learning ability and you must start from scratch each project with the team that you are going to work with". Although the client steered for a relational governance mode including criteria regarding collaboration to best support the long-term collaboration, criteria for the team involved were not included, opening the ability for the contractor to choose an approach that best fits its business model. The relationships with contractors that did work with a stable team profited from project-transcending learning effects and trust building. This was expressed in, among others, the Project Start Up process, where contractors already started designing without a contract signed yet.

In the SPBP, the client asked the contractors in the tender selection criteria to hand over their key-employees as part of their bid, who were supposed to play an important role in executing projects in the programme. This resulted in stable project teams at the contractors' sides. On the client's side, however, several employees perform the same role but in different projects. More specifically, multiple contract managers, project managers and environmental managers are involved for the programme, all executing several projects. This resulted in laborious communication, as the contractor had no overview of which actor from the municipality did what. For the projects executed within the programme, the contractor was continuously seeking for who to contact. Whereas in a project-based approach alignment between actors in individual projects is less relevant, the programmatic way of working demands for uniformity in

contact towards the contractors regarding project specific matters as these need to be included in subsequent projects too.

### **Routines**

For forgiving projects within the framework agreement, the WTP designed several formal routines in the procurement phase, ranging from formal procedures like mini competitions, towards a more informal division of works based on capabilities or capacity. The programme started off making use of the mini-competition procedure. However, as the programme proceeded, client and contractor organisations divided the projects in consultation. A pattern arose, following the steps of (1) internal approval for the new project, (2) a meeting planned between the client and the three contractors, (3) in which the contractors discussed who was best fit for the project, based on capacity, quality, and experience with previous projects within the programme. As a delivery system for projects within the programme, the routine emerged and overshadowed the formal mini-competition approach since mutual satisfaction on the informal approach was found both at the client-side as the contractor side. The not too tightly defined governance framework enabled to switch the project-dividing strategy along the way.

In the SPBP, a similar routine was pre-defined by the public client in the procurement stage, comprising a strategy of dividing the projects among contractors based upon a past performance system, to be used from the second year of the framework agreement. In the first year, the projects are given in turn to one of the contractors based on the turnover so far. This way, the client pursued a fair division of work between the two contractors. This work approach was clearly explained in the tender documents and put into practice exactly that way.

### **Responsibilities**

In the contract underlying the SPBP, the client demanded that the contractors entered a formal relationship with third parties when they needed those to comply with the capability requirements in the bidding phase. In practice, this rule resulted in a complex network where both contractors have agreements with different third parties for executing similar types of work. The client realises that it would have been more efficient and in line with project-transcending learning and the collaborative ambitions when both contractors made use of the same third parties, for example regarding environmental inquiries. The WTP had a different approach of dealing with key suppliers, motivated by the desire to standardize and make use of modular components for the Wastewater Treatment Plants (WWTP's). A 'catalogue' was initiated, for which, next to the framework contract, different specific solutions of suppliers were contracted. The contractors in the framework agreement all had to make use of the objects in the catalogue, to support uniformity and ease maintenance in latter periods. As these suppliers were involved under a different agreement, there was flexibility within the framework contract of whether using them.

Both programmes sought for ways to involve the 'right' third parties or suppliers for a longer period. However, the flexibility that the catalogue of the WTP provided, seemed a more durable collaboration model for the programme duration compared to the parties nailed down at start of the programme in the SPBP.

### **Relationships**

In both cases, a coach was involved to support the programmatic way of collaborating. For both the client organizations as on the contractors' sides, long-term ties with a

focus on transparency and trust were novel. The WTP selected the coach and determined its tasks herself. The SPBP used a coach from the internal organization and gave the contractors the opportunity to bring a coach of their own. The two coaches involved cooperated to support the client-contractor relationship for the duration of the programme. In both programmes involvement of the coaches was highly valued and supported a smooth external relationship, positively contributing to the intensity of the relationship.

For the SPBP, the intense collaboration between client and contractors also came along with unforeseen challenges related to the pre-defined arrangements of project division. From the second year onwards, projects are divided based upon past performance of the contractor. Due to close cooperation of client and contractor in preparation phase however, it was hard to assess the contractor's performance, being intertwined by input and efforts of the client. Hence, the key performance indicators to score the contractors as stated in the contract had to be revised.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this paper, we aimed to gain a better understanding of the implications programmatic collaboration for governing the client-contractor relationship in practice. In the previous section, we described how the arrangements set in the procurement stage align to the long-term relationship including repetitive projects that a programmatic collaboration entail. Where formalized arrangements enforced governing the relationship in practice by providing a clear structure, flexibility to reshape the governance structure along the duration of the programme seems necessary. Müller et al. (2015) already explained how adapting to changing requirements in projects requires organizational flexibility, enabling to align internal and external characteristics. Based on the results it is expected that governing interorganizational relationships at a programme level is supported by flexible programme structures too. However, the public-private context involving procurement regulation demands clients to be transparent about the conditions under which the collaboration takes place on beforehand (Kuitert et al., 2019), which may put a limit to the flexibility in formal governance structures.

We found that in some situations the client and contractors developed a relationship based on trust and mutual goals, in particular where both client and contractor worked with a stable team. Features of this were, among others, project-transcending learning, optimized processes, and clarity in task division for projects executed within the programme. Although the public clients did not include the requirement of deployment of the same set of employees in all cases, it confirms that it is beneficial to demand for deploying key-actors from the contractor's side, and work with a stable team from the client's side. An extensive body of previous research confirmed that fragmentation in construction in projects, project phases and a multiplicity of different actors involved per project and per phase negatively affects project performance (e.g. Baiden et al., 2006; Lieftink et al., 2019; Sandberg et al., 2020). By zooming in further, the results imply that fragmentation of actors involved per organization may have negative consequences for governing the interorganizational relationship as well.

Guiding employees in transitioning into a novel, project-transcending work approach and preventing them from 'falling back' into old behaviour, requires breaking with existing routines and replace them with novel paths of actions (Love et al., 2016). The effectiveness of involving a coach in interorganizational relationships to support in adapting to a new way of working is known (e.g. Ahiaga-Dagbui et al., 2020; Love et

al., 2015). Our results imply that a playing field where every party involved brings their own coach, increases the coaches' overall impact on the interorganizational relationship. Both sides seemed more willing to follow the coaches' directions compared to when only coach was involved for both parties.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study presents several implications of a project-transcending approach to collaboration for governing the relationship in practice. There seems to be a strong need to adapt the current, project-based governance structures to truly enable programmatic collaboration. Current governance structures do not appear to be focussed on durable relationships, such as the involvement of ad hoc employment, which causes tensions between the traditional, project-based structures and a programmatic approach. Despite the tensions and challenges, overall, a programmatic way of working strengthens the relationship between public and private organizations. Benefits include less opportunistic behaviour and conflicts and the emergence of cooptation. We furthermore found that trust and a cooperative mindset are key in facilitating the changes in an interorganizational context. For future research it would be interesting to study the dynamics of breaking with existing routines and creating novel ones, to increase our understanding of implementing a programmatic way of collaboration. Insights from this study can support the infrastructure sector to transform project-based relationships to project-transcending affairs, enabling to truly address societal challenges together.

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