

## Partner Selection Criteria for Participation-based Cooperation

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# PARTNER SELECTION CRITERIA FOR PARTICIPATION-BASED COOPERATION

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The Dutch construction industry is under pressure. In order to answer the expectations set by society, innovations are necessary. The industry stands in need of clients and contractors who find common objectives and work in participation-based cooperation (such as partnering or alliance) in order to stimulate innovation development. On paper, public clients strive for innovative cooperation with their contractors. Yet, many clients and contractors still try to realise their conflicting objectives, which leads to difficulties in the relationship and counteract innovation. Underlying this lack of support for participation-based cooperation is the inadequate knowledge on the criteria public clients must and may set in order to select a suitable partner. This study describes and analyses the selection of a partner for participation-based cooperation by a public client. Criteria for partner selection were assessed with a literature review in relation to participation-based cooperation. A hierarchical case study on five project alliances verified these criteria. The study shows that public clients have to reconsider the specification phase in the tendering process. The research indicates that certain additional criteria must be set if the selection of a partner is to succeed. In particular, criteria concerning the potential employees in the participation-based relationship are necessary. It is recognized by the Regieraad Bouw that public clients need wise applications in order to make clear decisions in the tendering process. The result of this study is a practical set of criteria, which can simplify the selection of a suitable partner and which can contribute to the support of participation-based cooperation in the Dutch construction industry.

**KEYWORDS:** cooperation, tender, criteria, public client.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Clients in the Dutch construction industry hardly ever possess the skills and knowledge needed to realize a project single-handed. They are ignorant of the opportunities and risks involving construction projects and therefore unable to cope with this. In order to complement their capability deficiencies, they search for a partner. Every relationship between a client and a contractor is based on some form of cooperation. However, various

levels of cooperation can be distinguished based on the alignment of objectives [1]. Thompson and Sanders also argue that this alignment of objectives is proportionate to the surplus value of the project. According to Thompson and Sanders, cooperation can be divided in four stages, represents new levels of alignment (see figure 1).

In the majority of relationships in the construction industry, legal protection of one's own interests and objectives is the main priority. This competitive mind-set leads to conflicts, deceleration and increasing costs. Competitive based cooperation is the underlying condition of the issues in the current construction industry [2].

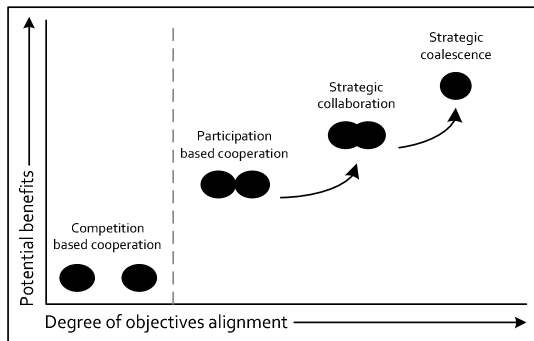


Figure 1 Levels of cooperation (based on

Thomson and Sanders, 1998)

As shown in figure 1, on the opposite of competition-based cooperation stands participation-based cooperation (such as partnering or alliance). Participation-based cooperation means a relationship between an active attending client and contractor who share the work and decision making for a project in which compromises lead to common objectives and in addition create surplus value. The common objectives lead to advantages in the relationship, resulting in project benefits such as time and cost reduction and increase of quality.

The government forms one of the largest professional clients in the Dutch construction industry. Private parties are their partners in mostly competitive based relationships. Innovations are necessary to anticipate the increasing pressure set by society. The industry stands in need of clients and contractors who find joint interests and work in participation-based cooperation in order to stimulate innovation development. The Dutch government supports this proposal. On paper, public clients strive for innovative cooperation with their contractors. Yet, most current projects are executed in relationships based on competition. Therefore, a shift from competition-based to participation-based cooperation is necessary. Both strategic collaboration and coalescence, which are based on a high level of common objectives, are currently one bridge too far.

According to Woerkum [2] successful participation-based cooperation requires a suitable project, involvement of suitable organizations and a well organized relationship. Much has been written on the assessment of projects and the composition of the relationships. The lack of support for participation-based cooperation by public clients lies therefore in the assessment of organizations. Many researchers [3 – 6] argue that participation-based cooperation will not succeed without trust between the partners. Unfortunately, public clients can and may not use this as a criterion during the tendering process. It is unclear to public

clients which criteria they must and may set in order to select a suitable partner. Therefore, according to the Regieraad Bouw [7] and Blokker [8], public clients experience difficulties in the partner selection process. The following example endorses this finding.

Example: Diversion Aalsmeer – Uithoorn, N201.

On the project N201 the public client, Province Noord-Holland, had the intention to form a participation-based cooperation (a project alliance). Preceding the tendering process, questions concerning the partner selection process, such as: how do we select the partner? and how do we make the decision transparent and objective?, arose. As a result of absent answers, Province Noord-Holland decided to put out a contract for a generally used competitive based cooperation hoping to switch to participation after tendering. [9]

As stated before, many researchers identify critical success factors of participation-based cooperation. In contrast with the success factors, little researchers provide information on criteria for such cooperation. Most of the provided criteria are focussed on the suitability of the project in the field of criteria to assess the organizations involved, studies get stuck in vague descriptions. Woerkum [2] for example names corporate culture and trust as the only factors that influence the suitability of an organization for participation-based cooperation. Koolwijk en Geraedts [2] identify three factors: affinity with the level of cooperation, accepting the approach and procedures and the innovative attitude of the partner. All factors are difficult to interpret for the public client.

The main question that arises is as follows: which criteria should be used in order to select a suitable partner for participation-based cooperation? This study expands on the current literature on the subject by converting the critical success factors into clear criteria. Next to that, criteria are formulated which prevent the relational problems between client and contractor in the current Dutch construction industry. This set of criteria is tested on five Dutch, experimental cases of participation-based cooperation. Finally, the criteria are shown in a practical model, which can simplify the selection of a suitable partner and which can contribute to the practice of participation-based cooperation.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Research questions**

In order to come to a recommendation on the improvement of the partner selection process for participation-based cooperation, by formulating the necessary criteria to select a suitable partner, three research questions has to be answered.

The first question is as follows: which requirements are demanded off the partners in the construction industry, forming a, participation-based, relationship? An extensive review of the literature dealing with participation-based cooperation is necessary. This type of desk

research was considered appropriate for the investigation as quantitative studies have been executed on both the relational problems between client and contractor in the current Dutch construction industry as well as the critical success factors of participation-based cooperation. Focus of the study lies in the terms cooperation, inter-organizational relationships, (project) partnering and (project) alliances. From this, requirements on the involved organizations are identified.

The next research question is put as follows: in the current Dutch construction industry, which elements of cooperation are paid attention to in participation-based cooperation projects? An in-depth study on the experimental, participation-based relationships between client and contractor in the Dutch construction industry was needed. The small number of samples and the in-depth instead of wide focus leads to the case study as fitting research strategy. Specifically a compared case study, which is executed hierarchically.

The case study design was based on the theory of Yin [10]. The study included the analysis of criteria set in five project alliances, the experimental participation-based relationships in the Dutch construction industry. Yin [10], Verschuren and Doorewaard [11] argue that in order to increase the reliability and validity of the results, data of different sources had to be used, which is called converging evidence (figure 2). This case study research contains interviews with involved people (clients and/or consultants), set selection and tendering protocols and results from evaluations. Observations have not been made the analysis of actual behaviour is not part of the aim.

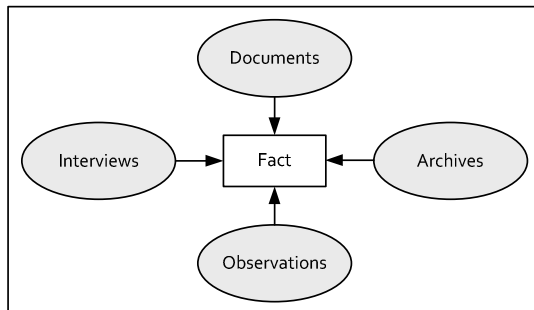


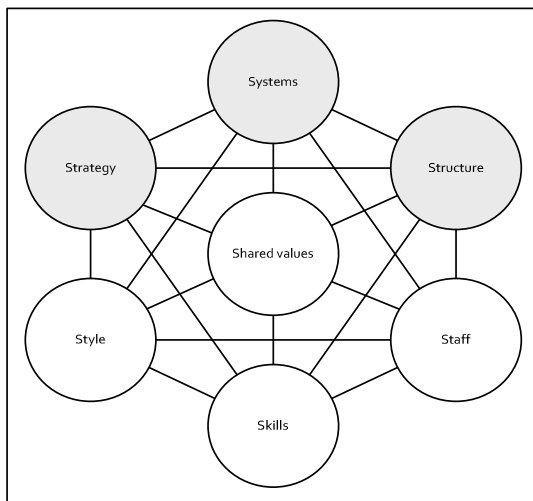
Figure 2 Converging evidence (Yin [10])

The last question is as follows: ideally, which criteria should a public client set in order to select a suitable partner for participation-based cooperation? The aim of this question is to formulate the necessary criteria by processing the results from the literature study and the case study. This set of criteria that resulted from the literature study is tested on the five Dutch, experimental cases of participation-based cooperation. Finally, the criteria are shown in a practical model, which can simplify the selection of a suitable partner and which can contribute to the practice of participation-based cooperation.

## 2.2 7S-framework

The necessary shift from competition-based to participation-based cooperation requires changes in the working-method of an organization. Several change management models exist, providing a scope for the analysis and improvement of the organization and its performance with regard to both internal and external factors.

This study focuses on the suitability of an organization for participation-based cooperation. The management model needed to provide a fitting scope for the research integrally assesses organizations and focuses only at the internal organization. The 7S-framework provides the scope for this study. Other management models pay considerable attention to external factors such as competitive organizations, customers and society. However, this research focuses on the internal suitability for a level of cooperation.



*Figuur 3 7S-framework [12], [13]*

The 7S-framework describes seven aspects of an organization (see figure 3):

- Strategy, the aim set by the management and the way to achieve this.
- Systems, the formal en informal procedures, regulations and agreements.
- Structure, the design of the organization, in the area of hierarchy, coordination, etc.
- Staff, the characteristics of the employees.
- Skills, the characteristic competences.
- Style, the behaviour of management and employees.
- Shared values, the social values within the organization.

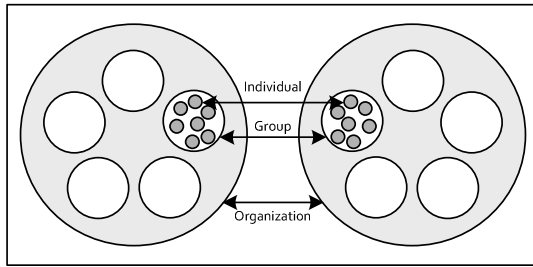


Figure 4 Levels of scale within organization

[14]

The behaviour of employees is influenced by factors from three different levels of scale: the level of the organization as a whole, of the group and of the individual [14] (figure 4). The success of participation-based cooperation depends on the behaviour of the people involved. This behaviour is influenced by the three organizational scales.

The organizational aspects are important on all scales. Decisions taken by the management of the organization as a whole influence the work floor and lead by the key figures. Taken participation-based cooperation in account, the organizational aspects are analysed on the scale they influence directly (see table 1).

Table 1 Organizational aspect by scale

Scale	Organizational aspect
Organization	Strategy
	Structure
Group	Skills
	Shared values
	Style
	Systems
Individual	Staff

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1 Criteria literature study

The literature study focussed on the relational problems between client and contractor in the current Dutch construction industry and the critical success factors of participation-based cooperation.

Tables 2 - 5 present the results of the analysis. The relational problems, stated by the client as well as the contractor, are shown in table 2. Part of these problems is overcome by the common objectives based on compromises which are part of participation-based cooperation. In order to prevent the other relational problems from happening, the organization should possess a number of specific qualities, as stated in the second column. The third column shows the organizational aspect from the 7S-framework the qualities fall under. This in order to have a fixed classification during the entire research project. Which will be elaborated on later.

Table 3 shows a comparison between the success factors of five different quantitative studies. Ten success factors of participation-based cooperation can be indicated. These are critical for the development of the intended participation-based relationship. These success factors are vague descriptions of organizational elements, and difficult to interpret for the public client.

Table 4 identifies the qualities required for the development of the identified success factors. All the required qualities to prevent the relational problems and to develop the success factors, should be taken into account assessing organizations on their suitability for participation-based cooperation. Table 5 gives an overview of these qualities, classified into the organizational aspects by scale.

*Table 2 Relational problems Dutch construction industry [15]*

<b>Relational problem</b>	<b>Quality that overcomes the relational problem</b>	<b>7S-aspect</b>
Differences in interpretation	Clear and equal communication	Systems
Indolence	Integrity	Style
Circumstances beyond control	<i>Not attribute to someone</i>	-
Miscommunication	Effective communication	Systems
Alterations in personnel	Stable organization and project team	Structure
Non-performance	<i>Overcome by common objective</i>	-
Poor adjustment	Cooperation skills	Staff
Missing chemistry	Capable key figures	Staff
	Trust	Staff
Deliberate deception	<i>Overcome by common objective</i>	-
Abuse	<i>Overcome by common objective</i>	-



*Table 3 Comparison critical success factors quantitative studies*

Factors	Sarkar	Chan	Cheung	Chan	Beach	Frequency	
	[16]	[17]	[18]	[19]	[20] <sup>1</sup>		
Mutual trust	1		1	1	6	9	Success factor
Common objectives	1	1		1	6	9	Success factor
Equality	1	1		1	6	9	Success factor
Management support		1			7	8	Success factor
Improve performance	1			1	5	7	Success factor
Commitment	1	1	1	1	2	6	Success factor
Effective communication			1		4	5	Success factor
Conflict resolution	1		1	1	3	6	Success factor
Financial objective	1		1	1	2	5	Success factor
Interdependency	1	1	1	1	0	4	Success factor
Compatibility	1				0	1	Low frequency
Focus on quality			1		0	1	Low frequency
Experience		1			0	1	Low frequency
General attitude		1			0	1	Low frequency

<sup>1</sup> Beach analyzed 8 different sources.

Table 4 Critical success factors participation-based cooperation

Success factor	Quality underlying success factor	7S-aspect
Mutual trust	Integrity	Style
	Capable people involved	Staff
	Positive shared experience	Staff
	Cooperation skills	Staff
	Positive attitude conflict resolution	Style
	Effective communication	Systems
Common objectives	<i>Overcome by common objective</i>	-
Equality	Proportionate effort and reward	Systems
Management support	Cooperation part of strategy	Strategy
Improve performance	Awareness of aims organizations	Shared values
Commitment	Complementary resources	Skills
	Common objective	-
Effective communication	Direct communication between people	Systems
	Communication on different levels	Systems
Conflict resolution	Positive attitude conflict resolution	Style
Financial objective	<i>Overcome by common objective</i>	-
Interdependency	Complementary resources	Skills

Table 5 Overview on literature of required qualities in order for participation-based cooperation to succeed

Scale	7s-aspect	Quality	Interest
Organization	Strategy	Cooperation part of strategy	Management support
	Structure	Stable compilation personnel	No alterations personnel
Group	Skills	Concerned employees complementary knowledge	Interdependency, commitment, common objective
		Concerned employees complementary skills	
		Concerned employees complementary management attitude	
	Shared values	Concerned employees aware of the partners aims	Improve performance
	Style	Concerned employees act integer	No indolence, conflict resolution, trust
		Concerned employees positive attitude conflict resolution	
	Systems	Direct communication between people	Effective communication, no differences in interpretation, trust
		Communication on different levels	
Proportionate effort and reward		Equality	
Individual	Staff	Direct communication between people	Capability key figures, trust
		Communication on different levels	Trust
		Key figures cooperation skills	Adjustment, trust

### 3.2 Criteria case study

The case study successively analyzed five project alliances: the Betuweroute section Sliedrecht – Gorinchem (Waardse Alliantie), the A2 junction Hooggelegen, the diversion of the N201 at section Aalsmeer – Uithoorn, the redevelopment of the Oostergasfabriek and additional developments on the campus of Maastricht University. The case study research concentrated on three topics: criteria to assess the suitability of the organization as a whole (prequalification), criteria to assess the suitability of the group and individuals (tendering) and criteria considered after evaluating the projects. Table 6 shows an overview of required qualities by scale according to the case study in order for this participation-based cooperation to succeed.

## 4. DISCUSSION

This study focuses on the Dutch construction industry. The literature about the success factors of participation-based cooperation is mainly originating from the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. The results from the research on competition-based cooperation in these countries are more inferior than the Dutch construction industry. Therefore, some factors concerning the relationship between client and contractor mentioned in these sources, are possibly less important in Dutch participation-based relationships than in the publishing countries.

Also in contrast to the counties mentioned before is the number of participation-based relationships. In the Dutch industry, only a few, experimental projects can be found. Because of the experimental nature of the projects, these projects have different characteristics. Because of the unequal preconditions, these new projects are not a full representative of participation-based cooperation between public client and private contractor. None of the less, with the results of this study, mentioned in section 3 a well found as, answer on the main question of this study can be obtained. In order to form an answer on the question 'which criteria should be set in order to select a suitable partner for participation-based cooperation?' the necessary qualities of an organization following the literature study were tested on those following the five Dutch, experimental cases. Table 7 shows the comparison between the literature study and the case study.

#### **4.1 Level of organization as a whole**

##### *Strategy*

Participation-based cooperation is a structural instrument in gaining objectives. Cooperation is part of the strategy. This is set by the management of the organization. In order to obtain their support for the relationship, the intended cooperation should be part of the organizational strategy. Both the literature and the cases name this quality.

*Tabel 6 Overview on case study of required qualities in order for participation-based cooperation to succeed*

<b>Scale</b>	<b>7s-aspect</b>	<b>Quality</b>	<b>Interest</b>	<b>Freq.</b>
Organization	Strategy	Management support	Positive influence negotiation	5
Group	Skills	Insight in risks participation-based relationship	Capability persons concerned	1
		Concerned people equal knowledge on cost management	Insight in financial advantage	1
	Shared values	Concerned employees aware of values parties	Best for project/value for money	2
	Style	Mutual respect between concerned people	Integrity	1
		Concerned employees share responsibilities	Improve performance	1
	Individual	Staff	Key figures positive attitude cooperation	Commitment
Key figures have competences and experience			Capability key figures	2
Key figures have confidence in relationship			Commitment	1
Former positive experience between key figures			Trust	1
Key figures experience with type of cooperation			Support type of cooperation	1
Key figures cooperation skills			Adjustment, trust	1

Table 7 Comparison qualities literature study and case study

Scale	7s-aspect	Quality literature study	Quality case study
Organization	Strategy	Cooperation part of strategy	Management support
	Structure	Stable compilation personnel	-
Group	Skills	Concerned employees complementary: Knowledge	Concerned people :
		Skills	Equal knowledge on cost management
	Management attitude	Insight in risks participation-based relationship	
	Shared values	Concerned employees aware partners aims	Concerned employees aware of values parties
	Style	Concerned employees act integer	Mutual respect between concerned people
		Concerned employees positive attitude conflict resolution	Concerned employees share responsibilities
	Systems	Direct communication between people	-
		Communication on different levels	-
		Proportionate effort and reward	-
		Direct communication between people	Key figures have competences and experience
Individual	Staff	Communication on different levels	Former positive experience between key figures
		Key figures cooperation skills	Key figures experience with type of cooperation
		Key figures cooperation skills	Key figures cooperation skills
		-	Key figures positive attitude cooperation
		-	Key figures have confidence in relationship
		-	-

### Structure

In literature, clients as well as contractors indicate alterations in personnel as a relational problem [15]. In order to comply with this quality, organizations need to be able to put in fixed personnel. Although in the cases alterations in personnel is not mentioned, it will be taken into the set necessary criteria. Deceleration of the process is often due to an instable organisation, this quality is important in participation-based cooperation.

## 4.2 Level of group

### Skills

In order to develop participation-based relationship, the involved group of employees from the client and contractor should possess complementary competences. This creates

interdependency between the parties, which leads to a concerned attitude. Logically, the cases describe more detailed qualities than the literature, as every project has specific needs.

#### *Shared values*

In current, competition-based relationships, the involved group of employees lack awareness of the partners aims, any form of dialogue is absent. This understanding of each others interests is part of the necessary shift from competition-based to participation-based cooperation and to improve the achievements. Both the literature and the cases name this quality.

#### *Style*

To prevent relational problems and develop success factors such as trust and conflict resolution the client as well as the contractor should act integer and adopt a positive attitude in conflict situations. Both the literature and the cases name this quality.

#### *Systems*

In project teams, communication and reward systems focussed on the intended cooperation are formulated. Literature show that is important for the group of employees to have experience with different type of systems. Effective communication and a proportionate effort and reward have a priority. In the cases, effective communication is mentioned as a requirement for the key figure, although experience show that it is important for all persons involved. It stimulates the cooperation. Reward systems are not mentioned in the cases. In project alliances, reward systems are set in the contract. In these cases, extra criteria in this area are not necessary. Because not all participation-based relationships have these systems in the contract, the reward system is put into the set criteria.

### **4.3 Level of individual**

#### *Staff*

People make or break cooperation. In order to develop the necessary success factors, the key figures in a participation-based relationship have to be capable. Next to that a shared positive experience stimulates the increase of trust. But most important, the key figures should have cooperation capabilities.

Table 8 summarizes the crucial set criteria in order to select a suitable partner for participation-based cooperation. In spite of the improvement of the partner selection process, this is no guarantee for a successful participation-based relationship. The chemistry between the persons involved still plays a major role in the success of cooperation. This is an inexplicable quality, that as such can not form a criterion. The model forms a scope, set by the public client, in order to influence the selection of people involved but does not assure success.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In current, competitive based relationships, cooperation is considered an incidental solution; participation takes place only when necessary. In participation-based relationships, cooperation is a strategic choice to increase project success. In order to succeed, suitable partners should be concerned.

In order to select a suitable partner, public clients set partner selection criteria. The criteria generally set by competitive based cooperation are focussed on the organization as a whole. This study indicates that certain additional criteria must be set if the selection of a partner for participation-based cooperation is to succeed. In particular criteria focussed on the people concerning the participation-based cooperation are necessary. This study expands on the current literature on the subject by providing clear criteria for Dutch public clients in order to select a suitable partner (table 8) and converting this into a practical model. To obtain this, current literature on cooperation is tested on experimental Dutch cases. Only a few Dutch participation-based cases are finished. The relationship between the used criteria and points of interest and the relationship between the client and the contractor during the project is an interesting continuation of this study. With this, the actual connection between this set criteria and cooperative success can be demonstrated.

*Table 8 Set partner selection criteria participation-based cooperation*

Scale	7s-aspect	Necessary quality	
Organization	Strategy	Cooperation part of strategy organization	
		Structure	Stable compilation personnel in organization
	Skills		Concerned employees complementary knowledge
			Concerned employees complementary skills
			Concerned employees complementary management attitude
			Concerned employees insight in risks participation-based relationship
		Shared values	Concerned employees aware of values of both parties
		Style	Concerned employees act integer
	Concerned employees positive attitude conflict resolution		
	Systems		Direct communication between people
		Communication on different levels	
		Proportionate effort and reward	
Individual	Staff	Key figures have competences and experience	
		Former positive experience between key figures	
		Key figures experience with type of cooperation	
		Key figures cooperation skills	
		Key figures positive attitude cooperation	



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