ONCE THE SHOVEL HITS THE GROUND

Evaluating the management of complex implementation processes of public-private partnership infrastructure projects with qualitative comparative analysis

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Summary in English

1. MOTIVATION, RESEARCH AIM, AND RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH

This thesis is about managing complex implementation processes of public-private partnership (PPP) infrastructure projects and the evaluation thereof with the method qualitative comparative analysis (QCA).

Against the background of the often disappointing performances of infrastructure development, such as cost overruns, time overruns, and social discontent, the practice and literature in the field of (PPP) infrastructure development often apply a risk-perspective. This perspective assumes a reality that is knowable and calculable. Risks are identified, calculated, and allocated to the public or private partner best able to manage the risk. Following this perspective, evaluations of infrastructure projects often point to ineffective or strategic risk identification, risk calculation, or risk management as causes of the disappointing performances. However, the reality of infrastructure project implementation is not perfectly knowable and calculable. It is fundamentally complex.

A lot of attention is devoted in practice and in the literature to the planning of projects. However, no matter how carefully they are planned, when projects are implemented – 'once the shovel hits the ground' – events occur that were often unforeseen and unplanned. If this complexity is recognized and acknowledged, then the attention in project evaluation can be focused on what can be learned from previous experiences with managing such events, so as to manage future ones more effectively. Contributing to this is the first aim of this research. The fundamental complexity of infrastructure development also imposes requirements on the evaluation method to be used. The method needs to acknowledge the complexity; it should be complexity-informed. Evaluation methods that are not create an unrealistic understanding of implementation processes with the consequence that evaluations tell us little about what works and what does not, in which contexts, and why. This hampers learning from evaluations. Identifying the requirements for a complexity-informed evaluation method, and assessing the extent to which QCA meets these requirements, is the second aim of the research.

Following these aims, the central research question is: *how can the implementation and management of PPP infrastructure projects be understood and evaluated from a complexity*

perspective using QCA, what management responses in project implementation yield (un) satisfactory outcomes, and how can this be explained?

By investigating this question, the intention is to contribute to different fields of literature. These are briefly discussed below.

1.1. Complexity and QCA

The complexity literature tells us that complex systems, such as implementation processes of PPP infrastructure projects, emerge from the interaction between a multitude of elements within the system and with the system's context. Understanding complex systems thus requires that their details and context are studied. Case studies are an appropriate means for this. The complexity literature also tells us that, because systems interact in a partly-shared context, similarities or patterns between systems can be recognized. These patterns are important to make lessons from case studies relevant to other cases. However, it is hard to uncover generalizable patterns from case studies. This thesis adds QCA to the complexity literature as a suitable method to combine the study of details and context with the need for pattern recognition.

1.2. Evaluation and QCA

QCA is a method on the rise. Literature reviews show that the number of QCA applications, including in the Public Administration literature, has strongly increased. QCA is also increasingly discussed and applied in the evaluation literature where it is, inter alia, conceptualized as a suitable method for theory-driven, realistic evaluation. In this thesis, QCA is conceptualized as a complexity-informed method. In doing so, it is added to the QCA and evaluation literature as a more grounded approach. As such, QCA recognizes and acknowledges the complexity of project implementation, and the heterogeneity of the public and private partners and project stakeholders involved in implementation. This makes QCA, as a complexity-informed method, suitable for learning from evaluations. The empirical studies in this doctoral thesis also introduce QCA in the field and literature of (PPP) infrastructure projects.

1.3. Project management and infrastructure projects

The literature about the management of infrastructure projects is dominated by approaches that understand project management as a rational process. In those approaches, projects are closed systems that are implemented according to predefined protocols and planning schedules. This is, however, not a realistic understanding of project management. Projects are not implemented in isolation; they interact with the socio-physical context in which they are constructed. Projects are open systems. Although the fundamental complexity of project implementation is increasingly recognized and acknowledged, this is yet insufficiently acted on in understanding and studying project implementation.

This thesis answers to the call in the project management literature for more situational, contextual approaches in project management research. This is done by conceptualizing project implementation and management from a complexity perspective, and applying this in empirical studies.

1.4. Public-private partnerships and infrastructure projects

Public-private partnerships are not a new phenomenon, but they are increasingly popular with governments as means to improve the performance of infrastructure development. A lot of attention is devoted in practice and in the literature to the planning – the spatial and public planning and the procurement – of PPP projects. The implementation – construction and delivery – that follows the planning phase receives less attention. This is unfortunate: if the implementation process is ineffectively managed, anticipated or obtained gains in the planning might be lost in implementation. This doctoral thesis answers to the call in the PPP literature for more research into the management of implementation processes of PPP infrastructure projects. Additionally, by means of an empirical study of a DBFM project, it contributes to the yet little available knowledge about the functioning and results of DBFM contracts – a specific type of PPP – in the Netherlands.

The next section explains how the central research question was studied and how this thesis is structured. Thereafter, the conclusions are presented.

2. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

Besides the introductory and concluding chapters, this doctoral thesis consists of six articles. These articles provide the building blocks to answering the research question (see Section 1.3 and Table 1.1 in Chapter 1).

The first two articles (Chapters 2 and 3) form the basis for the empirical studies. They address the first part of the research question. Based on complexity literature, a perspective is outlined as to how reality is understood. This perspective is then focused on infrastructure development, and the implementation processes in PPP infrastructure projects specifically. The complexity perspective results in methodological prerequisites for evaluation, after which it is assessed to which extent the method qualitative comparative analysis meets these requisites.

The other four articles are empirical. In the first two (Chapters 4 and 5), the implementation processes of two Dutch transportation infrastructure projects are separately analyzed: the A2 Maastricht and the A15 Maasvlakte-Vaanplein. Based on qualitative open interviews, a number of unforeseen events is identified. These events have a physical or social nature. For each event it is assessed: (1) how it was managed (a project-internal or project-external orientation), (2) how public and private managers cooperated herein (cooperation or non-cooperation), and (3) with what outcomes (satisfaction or dissatisfac-

tion). Next, the events were analyzed with QCA. This resulted in management patterns associated with either satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the implementation processes of PPP projects.

Thereafter, the patterns in the A2 Maastricht and A15 Maasvlakte-Vaanplein projects are compared in Chapter 6. The two projects are characterized by, inter alia, different management orientations, public-private cooperation, and outcomes. The project comparison offers explanations for the differences. In Chapter 7, the implementation processes of twenty-seven transportation infrastructure projects are analyzed with QCA. Qualitative and quantitative data were used from the Rijkswaterstaat project database, which were collected by being a visiting researcher at Rijkswaterstaat. By means of this medium-n comparative case analysis, the patterns and explanations from the two project studies are corroborated and further generalized.

3. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this section, the results and conclusions of the research are summarized. First it is specified what the four building blocks are of the complexity of project implementation, after which QCA is assessed against these building blocks, so as to be able to conclude how, and to what extent, QCA is a complexity-informed evaluation method. This concerns the first part of the research question. Thereafter, the results of the empirical studies are summarized to draw conclusions with respect to the management and public-private cooperation in the implementation processes of PPP infrastructure projects.

3.1. The four building blocks for complexity-informed evaluation

Learning from evaluations requires that the evaluation method is complexity-informed. This complexity does not just refer to the fact that implementation processes are very difficult. Reality is fundamentally complex. It consists of nested, interrelated systems. This implies that the implementation and management of PPP infrastructure projects can be understood on the basis of four building blocks of complexity: non-decomposability, contingency, non-compressibility, and time-asymmetry (see Section 8.2 in Chapter 8).

Non-decomposability means that the implementation and management of PPP infrastructure projects cannot be understood by separately studying the individual elements. Indeed, implementation processes emerge from the interaction between the project elements (inter alia, management strategies and PPP contracts) and with the context of the system (inter alia, stakeholders and the physical environment). Evaluation methods that are focused on isolating the effect of single variables on an outcome do not create a realistic understanding of implementation processes.

The second building block is contingency. This means that, because projects interact with social-physical contexts that are dynamic and particular for projects, implementation processes are unique. At the same time, similarities or patterns can be recognized because

projects are embedded in contexts that are partly stable and shared. Whilst similarities can be managed with known strategies, the unique aspects of projects require a situational approach. The implication for evaluation is that methods that try to establish universal laws do not create a realistic understanding of implementation processes.

Non-compressibility refers to the fact that it is fundamentally not possible to simplify reality: implementation processes and outcomes emerge from the interaction between systems in systems in systems (nestedness). However, to be able to comprehend the complex reality, public and private managers simplify their project reality. They have different simplifications, because they are nested in different systems, on the basis of which they act. Evaluation methods that ignore this heterogeneous and grounded nature of implementing and managing PPP infrastructure projects do not create a realistic understanding of it.

The final building block is time-asymmetry. This means that the development of infrastructure projects is unidirectional and irreversible; causality is characterized by emergence and non-linearity. Outcomes in/of implementation processes can be the logical results of sequences of events in hindsight, but those sequences were unknowable a priori, when projects were planned. Implementation processes have to contend with uncertainties and unforeseen and unplanned events. These events are managed. Evaluation methods that ignore this importance of time do not create a realistic understanding of the implementation of PPP infrastructure projects, and they impend to focus on ineffective or strategic risk identification and calculation instead of learning.

3.2. QCA as a complexity-informed evaluation method

The four building blocks of complexity impose requirements on the evaluation method. These are the following (see Section 8.4 in Chapter 8).

1. Non-decomposability: the method has to be able to evaluate how combinations of elements explain outcomes.
2. Contingency: (a) the method has to be able to evaluate how both peculiarities and similarities or patterns between cases contribute to explaining outcomes, and (b) the method has to be capable of limited generalization.
3. Non-compressibility: the evaluation method has to recognize and acknowledge the heterogeneity of project realities.
4. Time-asymmetry: the evaluation method should be able (a) to include the time dimension in explaining outcomes, and (b) to recognize that implementation processes are not perfectly predictable.

Based on the assessment of QCA against these requisites, it is concluded that QCA is a complexity-informed method. The first requirement is met. QCA is configurational: it analyzes how combinations of elements explain an outcome. QCA also meets the second requirement. The systematic qualitative comparative analysis is characterized by iterations between identifying case peculiarities and patterns between cases. In this way, QCA strikes

a balance between a focus on details and context on the one hand and pattern recognition on the other. The patterns that are found with QCA have a limited generalizability. This means that the third requirement is also met. QCA is a case-based research method. At the start of the research process, the complexity is minimally simplified by applying a grounded approach. This gives the heterogeneity of project realities a place in the evaluation. The fourth requirement is partly met. In essence, QCA is a comparative, static method that is not well capable of including time, temporality, or dynamics in the analysis. QCA does recognize the unpredictability of implementation processes: in QCA, it is explicitly recognized and acknowledged that patterns can have contradictory outcomes, that relationships are non-linear, and that generalization is limited.

The implementation and the management of PPP infrastructure projects can be evaluated with QCA in different ways. In this doctoral thesis, three dimensions of learning are proposed (see Figure 8.2 in Chapter 8). The first dimension is learning between projects or project implementations (see, e.g., Chapter 7). In this way, lessons from successful cases can be applied to similar but less successful cases. The second dimension is learning within a project or implementation. By comparing events or situations within a project with each other (see, e.g., Chapters 4, 5, and 6), managers within a project can learn what kind of events require what kind of management strategy and public-private cooperation. The third dimension concerns learning about actor's perspectives within a project. Each participant in the evaluation is a case, and by comparing these with each other it becomes clear where perspectives between actors differentiate and where they are similar. This offers opportunities for finding mutual understanding and consensus.

In this thesis, it is proposed that QCA can also be applied as a collaborative and interactive evaluation tool. For each of the three dimensions, QCA offers a four-step structure within which the evaluation participants can go through the evaluation process in a collaborative and interactive manner (see Figure 8.3 in Chapter 8). It is important here that the heterogeneity of actors is safeguarded by letting both public and private actors participate in the process. In this way, the knowledge base of the evaluation is strengthened, the public-private cooperation intensifies, and learnt lessons are easier fed back into the practice of implementing PPP infrastructure projects.

3.3. Management and public-private cooperation in project implementation

During project implementation, different unforeseen events occur in the project context. These events are of a social or physical nature. Social events concern stakeholders in the context of the project that react to the project implementation. Physical events originate from the physical system in which the project is implemented. These events are managed. The management strategy that is chosen is internally-oriented or externally-oriented. The difference is that the latter is characterized by an orientation on the social project environment: solutions for events are sought in interaction with stakeholders. This is not the case with the internally-oriented strategy. Furthermore, public and private managers choose to

work together in the management of an event (cooperation) or to stress the public-private boundaries and to separate responsibilities and tasks (non-cooperation). Because of the heterogeneity of public and private managers – they have different backgrounds, tasks, and responsibilities – the outcome of the management of events is not one-dimensionally definable. The outcome measure of 'satisfaction' is used in this thesis. It is a multidimensional concept that comprises multiple outcomes, such as: cost overruns, time overruns, social discontent, and the public-private relationship.

The QCA evaluations showed that different management strategies in PPP project implementation produce (un)satisfactory outcomes (see Section 8.4 in Chapter 8). Two results are:

1. An internally-oriented management strategy for social events results in unsatisfactory outcomes.
2. An externally-oriented management strategy for social events results in satisfactory outcomes.

On the basis of these results, it can be concluded that an externally-oriented management strategy is preferable over an internally-oriented management strategy in implementation processes. Two other results are the following:

3. An internally-oriented management strategy by the private partner results in unsatisfactory outcomes.
4. An internally-oriented management strategy, cooperatively or by the public partner, results in satisfactory outcomes.

These results show that, if the public and private partners cooperate, an internally-oriented strategy can also yield satisfactory outcomes. It can be concluded that a cooperative strategy is preferable over a non-cooperative strategy. However, cooperation is not necessary in the case of an externally-oriented management strategy. The results thus show that the effectiveness of internally-oriented management and non-cooperation can be increased by cooperation and externally-oriented management, respectively.

An explanation for the externally-oriented management strategy lies in the integrality of infrastructure projects. In integral projects, different spatial functions are combined which means that different stakeholders are involved. The advantage of the close involvement of stakeholders is that their interests are internalized in the project. This makes for less resistance from the stakeholder environment, and the stakeholder's interests are more knowable to the project's management. The challenge associated with the close involvement of stakeholders is that it might lead to more complicated (perceived) implementation processes and the need for intensive and costly stakeholder management. Conversely, keeping stakeholders more at a distance from the project results in less complicated (perceived) processes, but also the possibility of more resistance from the environment and

less knowledge of stakeholders' interests. This can lead to social unforeseen and unplanned events in project implementation, with possibly even higher costs as a consequence.

Explanations for the internal management orientation and non-cooperation lie in the contract type. In concessional types of PPP, such as DBFM, the success of the project is linked to meeting a challenging time planning. This time pressure creates an inward-orientation. Even more characteristic is that concessional PPPs have a contractual focus and a strict separation of public and private systems. In DBFM, the responsibility for project implementation lies with the private partner; the public partner focuses on monitoring the contractor. The advantage of this strict separation is transparency in the public-private relationship. The weakness is that it impedes cooperation across the public-private boundaries. This cooperation is important, inter alia with respect to stakeholder management. Public principals often feature stronger and longer-lasting relationships with stakeholders in the project environment. In DBFM, the danger is that these relationships are not used by the public partner because of the separation of responsibilities whilst it can contribute to a more effective project implementation. Alliance-like types of PPP are characterized, in contrast, by cooperation across the public-private boundaries, with the possible consequence that maintaining transparency in the cooperation is challenging. The optimum possibly lies in the middle, for example by organizing stakeholder management in an alliance within a DBFM contract. Further research can shed light on the effectiveness of this option.

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