

# Governance-as-practice for major public infrastructure projects: A case of multilevel project governing



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## KEYWORDS

- Project governance
- Governance-as-practice
- Practice research
- Public infrastructure

## Article highlight:

This paper presents a study of four major public infrastructure projects in Quebec, Canada. It was conducted in order to show how a common governance framework is translated into practice, from its institutional form to its enactment by those involved in the projects.

## What does the paper cover?

As project governance frameworks are adopted in more and more countries, it is assumed that people will comply with the relevant frameworks and project performances will improve by meeting their targets in time, costs and scope.

Yet, even where a governance framework is adopted by an institution, people will not necessarily act according to the original intention of such a framework; governance is something that people do rather than something organisations own.

Looking at project governance from the perspective of practitioners is therefore essential to complement what is already known about the subject. This research gap is quite important to tackle, as investments into major projects are high, and the overall performance of these projects still poor.

This paper builds on research already undertaken in this area, particularly in governance of major public infrastructure projects. The overall aim of the study was to look at the process of how a governance framework for public infrastructure projects is translated into practice.

## **Methodology:**

The researcher looked at four major infrastructure projects in Quebec, Canada, which all had to adhere to a common governance framework.

Specifically, she looked at how this framework was implemented in practice, what common patterns there were to its implementation, and whether there were any significant differences between the four projects in how the framework was implemented.

The research took the forms of non-participant observation in project meetings, semi-structured interviews with project managers and the main team members involved in the projects, and an analysis of documentation. The data collected were then transcribed and coded.

## **Research findings:**

The findings are divided into three aspects of project governance, as follows.

- 1.** *The relationship between the enactment of practices and their impact on governing.*  
The researcher considers that the enactment of practices, especially the 'facilitating', emerging ones at the project level, has a positive influence on project governing.
- 2.** *The link between sociomateriality of the governance framework and project governing.*  
The study looked at governance in action from a micro-perspective, and the results highlighted that fine-grained, mundane practices are constituent parts of project governance, much more so than has usually been described in the literature.
- 3.** *A proposed definition of 'governance-as-practice' as the concern with what people do in relation to project governance and how this is influenced by and influences their organisational and institutional context.*

## **Conclusions:**

Governance is put into practice in a dynamic process which impacts on three levels: the project, the organisational and the institutional.

Given that the enactment of practices at each of those levels plays a different but complementary role, studying the links between them and their temporary nature could be an interesting area for future research.

Another area is to uncover links between the enactment of practices, organisational learning and change, which might impact institutionalised tools.

## **Significance of the research:**

For governments and people involved in major infrastructure projects, the main contribution of this research is to understand and document current practices in order to reflect on them and gain deeper insights about project governance.

The study could be replicated in other countries, to find out whether these results are universal for other governments and governance frameworks.

## Comments from the author:

This research builds on the strategy-as-practice perspective, an international research movement which emerged in the late 1990s around the study of practices of strategy development and implementation. In a similar way, we posit that governance is not static but should be studied through interactions between practitioners, the material artefacts and governance practices.

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## Complete article

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## Glossary:

### **Sociomateriality:**

From 'social', meaning governing, and 'material', meaning governance, the two being equal constituents as there is an inherent inseparability between the technical and the social.

### **Governance-as-practice:**

The study of how specific governance is put into practice by people who are directly involved in a project.

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