

ACTIVITIES AND CAPABILITIES OF POLITICAL ACTORS IN INTERNATIONAL PROJECT BUSINESS

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Abstract

In this paper, we draw on industrial network research to analyze the activities and capabilities of political actors in project networks. Our research question is: what activities and capabilities do political actors bring to project networks and how do their involvement impact the project network? We use the concept of ‘political embeddedness’ to show how business and political exchange can be interrelated in industrial networks, with business actors engaging in political behaviour and political actors taking on business roles such as purchasing. We report on a comparative case study that encompasses two international project networks, which vary according to the type and role of political actors. Our case analysis shows the multifaceted activities and capabilities of political actors, in terms of: 1) their relationships with firms and other political actors, and 2) their role and importance in the network. We also conclude that these activities and capabilities have implications for international project marketers in terms of their activities at each stage of the project cycle.

Keywords: Networks, international project marketing, political actors, non-business actors, complex roles

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INTRODUCTION

Projects are integrated product, service and know-how solutions to the needs of the purchaser (Cova and Salle 2007; Cova, Ghauri and Salle 2002). Three characteristics of projects have been recognized in the literature: *discontinuity*, which means that their beginning and end are clearly defined; *uniqueness*, in that no two projects can be entirely the same regarding technical or business characteristics; and *complexity*, which refers to the technical and organizational complexity of putting together interrelated products or systems for the project (Cova, Ghauri and Salle, 2002). In spite of some of the inherent transaction characteristics of projects, successful project business involves a network of cooperative relationships and relationship management within and between projects (Jalkala et al., 2010; Skaates, and Tikkanen 2003).

The actors in a project network include marketers, purchasers, sub-contractors, consultants, suppliers and financiers. Our review of existing international project business research reveals that, while empirical studies have mostly involved business actors on the seller side, on the buying side political actors form the majority in published research, outnumbering firms as clients (see the cases in e.g. Björkman and Kock 1995; Owusu 2002; Welch et al. 1996). However, while some existing studies have touched on the role of political relations in marketing projects (Cova and Salle 2007; Welch et al., 1996), their role throughout the project cycle has not been investigated systematically.

In this paper, we answer the research question: what activities and capabilities do political actors bring to project networks and how does their involvement impact the project network? We analyse the involvement and impact of political actors at different stages of the project lifecycle. We will generate knowledge of their complex capabilities, and how their roles as buyers, regulators, co-project implementers and stakeholders create complex impacts on the project network.

Our paper draws on a growing recognition among industrial network researchers that in order to understand economic exchange, it is not sufficient to limit one's analysis to economic actors alone. As well as the economic actors like suppliers, distributors, service organisations and competitors that are connected directly or indirectly to a firm, researchers have acknowledged the importance of a range of actors whom have been variously termed 'political' (Bengtson, Pahlberg and Pourmand, 2009; Hadjikhani and Thilenius 2005; Hadjikhani and Håkansson 1996), 'institutional' (Sjöberg 1996), 'non-business' (Hadjikhani and Thilenius 2005) and 'extrabusiness' (Cova and Salle 2000). Political actors are a broad category of actors with political tasks or wielding political influence that include governments, interest groups, business associations, trade unions, experts and opinion-makers, research institutes, the media and public opinion (Hadjikhani and Håkansson 1996). Institutional and non-business or extra-business actors are a similarly broad term, referring to the fact that these actors are not a direct party to a business exchange relationship as buyers or suppliers.

Our focus in this paper is on development projects, in which governments are involved. Accordingly, we examine the phases of two infrastructural projects that were implemented in two countries and which were financed partly through aid or concessional loans. In developing countries infrastructural projects are usually purchased by political actors such as Government Departments and parastatals. As they are major expenditures for the Government and are usually placed within national development plans, their political and economic significance is high. Not only are they brought into being by Government policies, their implementation, completion and after-project life are framed within the institutional environment.

First, we review existing project marketing literature to understand how political actors have been incorporated, both conceptually and empirically. We then turn to the industrial network literature on political embeddedness to suggest it provides us conceptual arsenal for expanding the understanding of the activities and capabilities of political actors beyond what has been previously recognized in the literature. We then present the findings from our two projects. In the conclusion, we suggest implications of the multifaceted capabilities of political actors in project networks and how project marketers should manage relationships with them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Table 1 shows the buyers that have featured in previous empirical studies on international project (conceptual articles have been excluded). Of the 19 studies in which the buyer is specified, 15 are political (a government ministry, agency or corporation) while only 4 are private enterprises. The preponderance of political buyers – a contrast to the general literature on industrial buyer behaviour – perhaps reflects the focus on large infrastructural projects, which are often commissioned by governments, and on countries, such as China and India, where government intervention in the economy is still very high.

Table 1: The project buyer in existing industrial network research

Project buyer	Source
Not specified	Cova, Mazet and Salle 1994; Dahlgren and Söderlund 2001; Sharma and Kell 1993; Skaates et al 2002a; Skaates et al. 2002b (Danish architectural case).
Political buyer(s)*	Ahlström and Brege 1999; Björkman and Kock 1995; Cova, Crespín-Mazet and Salle 2001; Cova, Salle and Vincent 2000; Hadjikhani 1996; Hadjikhani 1998* Owusu 2002; Owusu and Welch 2007; Ramamurti 2003; Sharma 1989; Skaates et al. 2002b (FINSYS case); Sharma and Johanson (1987) (KM case); Welch et al. 1996; Welch 2005
Private buyer(s)	Cova and Salle 2000; Huemer 2004; Sharma and Johanson (1987) (J&W case); Skaates, Tikkanen and Alajoutsijärvi 2003
Political actor as regulator, or Guarantor	Björkman and Kock 1995, Welch et al., 1996
Political actor as Financier	Hadjikhani 1996; Skaates et al. 2002b (FINSYS case); Welch et al. 1996
Political actor within the “Milieu”	Tikkanen et al, 2007; Cova and Hoskins 1997; Cova, Mazet and Salle 1996

In addition, political actors may have a position in the project network as a regulator/approver/guarantor or financier (see Table 1). These network positions may well be more central than what has often been assumed. Traditionally, financiers provide funding and are also seen as influencer or ‘channel of communication’ with buyers (Sharma 1989). However, Welch (2005) found that multilateral organizations may directly sign contracts with suppliers, and even if they are not the contractual buyer, their role in the buying process is sometimes substantial enough to be regarded by suppliers as a client. Owusu (2002) showed that bilateral and multilateral financiers impact the purchasing process in developing countries.

As well as having been designated as part of the project network itself, political actors have been portrayed as part of the environment or ‘milieu of demand’ that exists independently of a project. The milieu consists of the set of economic and socio-political actors ‘directly or indirectly influencing project demand’ (Cova et al. 1994, p. 41; Cova et al., 1996). Some actors in this milieu represent ‘poles of continuity’, because they have contacts with a large number of actors that tend to endure across numerous projects (see also Cova and Hoskins 1997). These ‘poles of continuity’ may well be government bodies and funding agencies, not just private enterprises such as international

consultants.

Existing evidence suggests that the involvement of political actors does make a difference to international project networks, in a number of ways. The first relates to the structure of the buying network of projects. While it is a common feature of international projects that purchasing activities are undertaken by a network rather than a single organisation (Owusu and Welch 2007), it seems that the number of actors involved in government procurement can be particularly large. A large grain silo project in China, co-financed by the World Bank, involved over eleven institutional actors at the tender phase of the project (Welch et al. 1996). In developing countries, the involvement of foreign donors and financiers affects the tendering process in fundamental ways, with project marketers needing to understand and respond to the rules and preferences of both local governments and foreign Government financiers (Welch 2005; Owusu and Welch 2007).

The second effect of buying networks dominated by political actors may be on relationships among suppliers. In particular, governments may prescribe the extent and nature of local collaborations. For example, a project seller may be required to select a particular local supplier (Owusu, 2002). Marketing to governments also requires knowledge of institutional hierarchies (Cova et al. 2002) and, possibly, the management of political risk (Hadjikhani 1998). Welch et al. (1996) suggested that sometimes the best way for a project marketer to market to institutional actors is to involve its own institutional actors in its seller network. Thus, the Australian trade facilitation agency, Austrade, was important in developing relationships with the Chinese Government and World Bank (Welch et al. 1996).

Existing literature on international projects has established that political actors are present; the next issue, then, is to consider how they should be conceptualised. While this has not yet been addressed by research into international project business, the political embeddedness of networks is an existing focus of industrial network research more generally. The key argument made by this stream of research is that 'the integration of non-business actors will shed new light on our understanding of the business firms' behaviour' (Hadjikhani and Thilenius 2005, p. 37). Welch and Wilkinson (2004) provided a review of this literature, suggesting that in existing industrial marketing research, four dimensions of political embeddedness have been proposed: political actors, who may have direct or indirect positions in business networks and engage in business exchange; political resources, such as legitimacy, which business actors may seek to acquire; political activities that business actors may engage in, such as lobbying; and the broader institutional setting, provided by government policymaking, within which business networks evolve.

In existing research on 'political embeddedness', the political actor is typically viewed as a 'connected actor' (Hadjikhani and Thilenius, 2005). In other words, it is connected to one or both of the actors in a business exchange relationship, but is not a direct party to this exchange. Political actors are, then, one step removed from business exchange. Yet, political actors may also be direct parties to a business contract, thus assuming 'economic' and not just 'political' positions in networks. Thus, Welch and Wilkinson (2004) analyse a business network in which a government ministry was the contractual buyer. However, the activities and resources of 'direct' political actors are not well understood in existing research on political embeddedness.

In this paper, we seek, therefore, to follow the lead of existing research into political embeddedness and inquire how the involvement of political actors makes a difference to international projects. However, in contrast with existing literature, we investigate networks in which institutional actors have 'economic' positions as project purchasers or financiers. As 'direct' and not just 'connected' actors, what are the resources and capabilities they bring to the project and what activities do they engage in? In other words, we conceive political actors as active agents in the

project network whose activities and resources need to be considered in order to understand project business in this context.

METHODOLOGY

The two three cases selected for this study are development projects, in which we expect the roles of political actors and factors to be most pronounced. The projects are conceived as part of national economic and political agendas and a wide array of political forces would play a role in their formulation. In developing countries they are likely to include the activities of international bilateral and multilateral financiers. Their uniqueness and complexity would be more pronounced from the perspective of project marketers from developed countries as the social, economic and technological environment is likely to differ sharply from developed country markets. Therefore, development projects provide a “transparently observable” context for the phenomenon we are investigating (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 537).

Table 2: Project, Political Actors and Data Collection

Case	Type of actor	No. of interviewees	Year of Interviews
Ghanaian electrification project	Political actors in Ghana	6	2009; 2005; 2000-2002;
	Political actors in Finland	4	2009; 2000-2002;
Tanzanian road maintenance project	Political actors in Tanzania	4	2009; 2005
	Multilateral institutional actor (World Bank)	3	2009; 2005

Our aim in choosing the cases has also been to achieve purposeful sampling, even as the development context described above enabled us to reduce extraneous variation (Eisenhardt, 1989). We have chosen projects that are different in three main ways (see Table 2): 1) different types of external project actors – a bilateral concessional credit financier (AEP); a multilateral concessional financier (RMMS); 2) different types of projects and different sizes, i.e construction (AEP); material delivery and consulting/training, 3) different management capacities of the political actors at the time the projects are appraised and implemented: according to the World Bank relatively good project management capacity in the case of AEP and inadequate but improving project management capacity according to the World Bank (RMMS) (World Bank, 2003; World Bank, 2002; World Bank,)

The data was acquired from interviews with the project marketers (IVO from Finland and SMEC from Australia), as well as all the political actors mentioned in Ghana, Tanzania, Finland. Nevertheless triangulation was achieved through the inclusion of multiple informants at political decision-making, managerial, and operational levels. Another source of data was project documentation provided by the parties as well as others publicly available at websites and in public documents.

All interviews were retrospective (Table 2), possibly leading to reduced data quality due to memory loss. However, we believe that interviewees were more open and reflective than they would about current events, as political and even job security considerations would weigh strongly on civil servants in these kinds of situations (see Easton, 1995). We also used critical event probing techniques to get interviewees to recollect and narrate events.

Data analysis was made by means of qualitative content analysis, which enabled us to code our data according to our conceptual categories: activities and resources. We traced the resources and

activities of institutional actors at each major project stage, with our findings presented in the next section. The interplay between theory and data (Dubois and Gadde 2002) formed the basis for the further theory development which we present in our analysis section. In our reporting, we focus on the cross-case analysis rather than including detailed narratives of each individual case (see Yin 2003).

COMPARATIVE CASE ANALYSIS

Table 3, below, summarizes the features of the projects and the political actors involved both from the project country and abroad. Both projects in our study were components of larger national programs to improve economic development and infrastructure.

Table 3: Comparison of the three projects

	Ashanti Electrification Project (AEP), Ghana.	Road Maintenance Management System (RMMS), Tanzania
Description	US\$12.5 million electrification line extension and connection project that was a small part of the National Electrification Scheme, a 6-phase, 30-year project to improve the national power supply grid	USD 243,000 project to provide consulting, training and software services to establish a road maintenance and management system in 8 municipal councils.
Project marketers	IVO International	SMEC International
Local political actors	Ministry of Energy (MOE), Ministry of Finance, Electricity Company of Ghana (ECG), Volta River Authority (VRA), Regional and Local Administrations	President's Office Regional and Local Government (PORALG), Central Tender Board (CTB), Tanzanian Roads Authority (TANROADS), Local Councils.
Foreign political and institutional actors	Ministry for Foreign Affairs (Finland), (Development Cooperation Department); Concessional Credit Committee	World Bank

The AEP was a small part of the first phase of the National Electrification Scheme (NES), a 30-year programme aimed at expanding and improving the national electricity production and supply grid. The NES was started by the new government that took power in the early 1980s as part of a reform package to improve the national economy. A similarly reform-minded government in Tanzania in the 1990s had seen it become the second largest recipient of World Bank financing in Africa. The RMMS was a small component of a World Bank financed project for urban sector rehabilitation.

Pre-bidding stage

At this early project stage, governments were involved in setting the economic objectives of the projects, completing the early design phase and securing financing. These activities required input from different ministries, given the budgetary and administrative implications. In doing so, the government ministries did not act alone. Other interests like local NGOs and political pressure groups could be active in influencing project aims and scope. In Ghana, regional and community organisations had been pressing for access to power. They had been joined by two parastatals: the Volta River Authority (VRA), which manages the power production facilities, and the Electricity Company of Ghana (ECG), the retailer of power and owner of the lines. Project financing required international linkages. The Urban Sector Rehabilitation Project in Tanzania was supported by a World Bank loan. Even the AEP, which was not directly funded by the World Bank (although other components of the National Electrification Scheme were), received its tacit approval, thus making it

easier to source financing. Expert advice from government agencies and ministries and consultations with project stakeholders supplemented the project design expertise of the local and external consultant, who initially appraised the project. Given that both the AEP and Tanzanian projects were to be financed partly through external loans or aid, project appraisal had to follow the requirements set out by Finland and the World Bank. In both countries, the ‘institutional capacity’ of the relevant government agencies in terms of their procurement and project management capabilities, had to be demonstrated. In Ghana, the government had strengthened its project management capabilities by establishing an Electrification Board within the Ministry of Energy to manage the National Electrification Scheme. The Board consisted of experts in various aspects of the programme.

Bidding stage

The bidding process was very much determined by the financing of the project, as bilateral and multilateral agencies require their procurement standards to be followed as a condition of financing.

In Tanzania and Ghana, the national governments run the bidding process. In Tanzania, as per World Bank rules, the bidding process was conducted by the President’s Office Regional and Local Government (PORALG), the Local Government Ministry that had been designated as the implementing agency in the loan agreement. A project management unit was set up in PORALG that brought together the required procurement, project management and technical expertise, and also had the task of liaising with other relevant authorities such as the Tanzanian Roads Authority. While World Bank officials were not involved in consultant selection – in this case, the consultant being SMEC – PORALG required the Bank to issue a ‘no objection’ statement on the procurement process before proceeding, as well as approval from Tanzania’s Central Tender Board. In Ghana, the Concessional Credit offered by the Finnish Export Bank and the Development Cooperation Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs precluded competitive bidding as at least 80% of project purchases had to come from Finland. Therefore, a preliminary agreement was reached between the Ministry of Energy and project marketer IVO International on the broad technical-economic outlines of the project. These were specified and a final contract signed after financing had been secured from Finland. The project appraisal report and the report on Ghana’s national economy made by the Development Cooperation Department of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs were important documents that paved the way for the granting of concessional credit.

Implementation stage

In Ghana, the Ministry of Energy, and the parastatals VRA and ECG were actively involved in the project activities at this stage. This was a stage of intense interactions between the project network actors. A lot of the project construction was yet to be designed in detail. The Ministry of Energy, ECG and VRA were critical in completing project design through liaising with the regional and community parties where necessary. The Project Management Committee supervised the project implementation process. It consisted of representatives of the Finnish project marketer (IVO), the Ministry of Energy, ECG, and VRA, among others and was chaired by the Ministry of Energy. The Committee met once every month to follow-up the progress of work and deal with problems. Outstanding problems usually required political, administrative and other resources of the Ministry of Energy, ECG, and VRA. After meeting in the office, the committee went to the project sites to deal with issues. The presence of government officials from the Ministry of Energy, and in some cases accompanying local and regional administration officials was often enough to get local landowners and traditional authorities to agree to help to solve issues of land access etc that arose.

In Tanzania, there was also constant cooperation from political actors at the implementation stage, but bottlenecks developed that related to the institutional capacity of various government

actors. The project management unit in PORALG was praised by the World Bank for its ‘proactive’ and ‘learning’ approach to the Urban Sector Rehabilitation Project, such as conducting extensive site visits and avoiding conflicts with contractors by ensuring prompt payments. At this stage in the project, the World Bank had a monitoring role, with a dedicated task team receiving half-yearly reports from the Tanzanian Government and conducting supervisory missions twice a year. In the implementation completion report for the project, both sides – PORALG and the Bank’s task team – praised each other’s spirit of cooperation.

The situation at the municipal level, the local towns that were the beneficiaries of the RMMS system, was somewhat of a contrast. There, SMEC encountered problems, not anticipated in the bidding phase, concerning the matching of a sophisticated asset management system with the infrastructure and resource deficiencies in a developing country. As a project manager in PORALG summarized: ‘We had cases where the system was not very appreciated or understood. Some of the beneficiaries (political actors) were probably not very interested to have such a system working’.

Implications and Conclusion

The activities and resources provided by local and international political actors are summarized in Table 4. The evidence from our cases shows that political actors are important at each stage of the project cycle, including implementation. As Table 4 details, the key political actors in our two networks were local government ministries and agencies, parastatals, international financiers (bilateral aid agencies and multilateral lenders), and local authorities and community groups. These political actors could be both ‘connected’ – and ‘direct’ – such as Tanzania’s PORALG, which was the project purchaser. Infrastructural project networks in developing countries are sites in which political and business exchange become connected and mutually dependent, in ways that directly affect the project marketer.

Table 4 shows that the political actors provided a wide range of capabilities and engaged in multiple activities; however, these varied in part depending on how the projects were structured and financed. The Finnish institutional actors were only financiers and thereby became rule-setters regarding the bidding process as they required that at least 80% of the project be purchased from Finland. However, they were not directly involved in the negotiations between purchaser and marketer. Apart from rule-setting regarding the bidding process, the World Bank directly influenced project planning, appraisal and implementation.

In both cases, the genesis of the projects lay in government policies and international relations with bilateral and multilateral financiers. Only gradually did the technical-economic solution of the project emerge from these policy processes and networks. The project marketers (SMEC and IVO) became involved at the bidding phase, which was highly formalized and rule-bound, given requirements for public accountability and the involvement of international financiers. At the implementation phase, the role of institutional actors went beyond that which was formally specified and envisaged in the project design. Their intervention became crucial when difficulties emerged that had not been originally anticipated and which are linked to the uniqueness of the technical solutions. In both the AEP and RMMS, which were implemented in rural settings, the project marketers had experience of similar projects and anticipated difficulties that could emanate from the unique and underdeveloped project context. However the problems that arose could not have been solved without the regulatory, relationship and even coercion/reward resources of the political actors.

Table 4: Summary of activities and resources of institutional actors

Political actors	Activities	Capabilities provided
<u>AEP</u> <i>Ministry of Energy</i>	Project conceptualization, appraisal, gaining political support for project, chairing Project Management Committee, solving critical events of projects	Technical, political, management, relationship management
<i>Volta River Authority (VRA)</i>	Project conceptualization, appraisal, gaining political support for project	Technical, management, relationship management
<i>Electricity Corporation of Ghana (ECG)</i>	Project conceptualization, appraisal, gaining political support for project, solving critical events of projects	Financial
<i>Ministry of Finance</i>	Project financing	Financial
<i>Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Finland</i>	Project financing, project appraisal, rule setting	Management, relationship, Financial
<i>Finnish Export Bank</i>	Project financing	Financial
<u>RMMS</u> <i>President's Office, Regional and Local Government (PORALG)</i>	Project appraisal, providing political support for project	Political, management, relationship management
<i>Local Councils</i>	Project appraisal, providing political support for project	Management, relationship management
<i>Central Tender Board</i>	Regulatory approval	Technical
<i>Tanzanian Roads Authority</i>	Project conceptualization, appraisal	Technical, management, relationship management
<i>World Bank</i>	Project conceptualization, appraisal, project financing, rule setting	Technical, management, financial

At the same time, political actors could exhibit resource deficiencies and political objectives that complicated the delivery of the project. Moreover, the objectives of local and foreign political actors did not always coincide, leaving the project marketers to try to reconcile conflicting demands. In the case of the AEP which was funded through a bilateral scheme (AEP), there were obligations on the recipient to buy services from the donor country. In the project funded through a multilateral loan (RMMS), there was a gulf between the technical specifications required by the financier and the actual level of development in the project towns.

In conclusion, the networks were made more complex with the membership of political actors who brought in capabilities but burdened the business network with their innate political aims. *Both projects encountered different degrees of hurdles but were regarded as successful*, which can be attributed to the fact that the involved political actors demonstrated sufficient commitment and capabilities; and, at the same time, the project marketers took a proactive approach to managing relationships with the various political actors critical to project delivery. Closer attention to the various roles, activities and resources of political actors is therefore also warranted by academic research into international project marketing.

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