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EXPERIENCE IN PROJECT NETWORKS FOR LOCAL
SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT IN TRANSITION
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Laura Tampieri

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The ties interdependence and the experience in project networks for local systems development in Transition Countries

Laura Tampieri

Abstract

The paper analyses the connection between the ties interdependence and the experience as two organizational variables that affect the behaviour of project networks for local systems development in Transition Countries. The research investigates from one side the ties interdependence of project units coming from their participation to previous initiatives and, from the other side, the experience derived by the years in which each unit accomplished project management activities.

The hypothesis of a connection between these variables is verified by analysing five projects managed by Bologna University through its decentralized bodies for Western Balkans development in the period 2004-2013.

The results confirm the correlation between ties interdependence and experience obtained by each single unit in project networks. This means that the development of many project networks over the years has been happened through the consolidation and creation of partnerships.

L'articolo analizza il collegamento tra l'interdipendenza dei legami e l'esperienza come due variabili organizzative che influenzano il comportamento delle reti di progetto per lo sviluppo dei sistemi locali nei Paesi in Transizione. La ricerca analizza da un lato l'interdipendenza dei legami tra le unità di progetto derivante dalla loro partecipazione in iniziative precedenti e, dall'altro lato, l'esperienza derivante dagli anni in cui ogni unità svolge attività di project management.

L'ipotesi di un collegamento tra queste variabili è verificata analizzando cinque progetti gestiti dall'Università di Bologna, attraverso le sue sedi decentrate, nei Balcani Occidentali, per il periodo 2004 -2013.

I risultati confermano la correlazione tra l'interdipendenza dei legami e l'esperienza ottenute da ogni singola unità nelle reti di progetti. Questo significa che lo sviluppo delle diverse reti di progetto negli anni è avvenuto attraverso la creazione ed il consolidamento di partnership.

Keywords: network, ties, project management, experience

1 – INTRODUCTION

In recent years the high diffusion of projects in public, private and no profit organizations to get funding at national and international level lead scholars to investigate many fields of study concerning the inter organizational ties (Granovetter 1973; Uzzi 1997, 1996), power (Brown 1996; Dahl 1957; Dawson 1996; Giddens 1979; Parenti 1978; Lukes 1974), organizational behaviour (Bagozzi et al. 2012) and trust (Shazi et al. 2015).

In particular, the location of each unit in project networks strongly affects the time in project management and performance. The latter is connected to pro-

ject structure and process for the definition of budget share and activities.

The paper underlines the behavioural approach of project networks in terms of the degree to which actions by one organization can be shown to have a discernible effect on the behaviour of others (Pfeffer 1997). In project networks some units assume a certain behaviour to achieve increasing resources.

Two elements contributed to increase the relevance of this study: 1) the recent global crisis that pushed different organizations, mainly Universities, to submit projects in several financing calls in order to get some alternative resources in contrast with the decreasing internal ones; 2) the growing need to develop fruitful networks of researchers that are willing to

Laura Tampieri
Department of Management - Bologna University, Italy
laura.tampieri@unibo.it

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share their existing grounds and to produce an innovative scientific area.

The research investigates five Bologna University international projects realized in the period 2004-2013 for Western Balkans development in the frame of the following financing programmes: TEMPUS, INTERREG, Emilia-Romagna Law, IPA and Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The development of the local systems in Western Balkans for a successful transition to a knowledge-based economy and society based on the training of a new generation of leaders was the common target of these projects.

The specific initiatives were addressed to different objectives: 1) The development of SMEs in different sectors; 2) The modernisation of higher education system with the establishment of PhD; 3) The improvement of professional education; 4) The promotion and management of cultural heritage.

In these international calls and projects the Universities were the key actors assuming the role of coordinator or partner. They are located in the local systems with a different governance than companies, NGOs and Local Governments (Tampieri 2009a).

So the focus of the research is set on the organizations, mainly Universities, in project networks considering the ties may be created among them through the common participation in the examined projects from one side and their experience to carry out project management activities from the other side.

These two variables (ties interdependence and experience) are linked to the organizational behaviour exercised by each unit in project networks: the first influences the network in terms of a better governance of relationships so that the reciprocal knowledge among units can facilitate, through mainly informal channels of communication, projects preparation and realization.

Referring to the experience of each unit in project management activities over the years, this is linked to the ownership and usage of a better knowledge on how to structure a project and so in the time of its preparation and activities realization such as budgeting and reporting.

The research question is whether there is a connection between the ties interdependence derived from the participation to previous initiatives with other partners and the experience based on the years of project management activities realization.

The paper contributes to the research on the organizational approach may be applied to project management that increasingly underlined the network and its ties as lens of investigation.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, the theoretical background and hypothesis development are outlined. Then the analysis with the description of data on ties interdependence and experience are highlighted. On the basis of the analysis, the results are

presented and discussed. The final section concludes with research limitations and future lines.

2 – THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

The Project Management (P.M.), constantly growing in last decades, presents relevant organizational aspects that can be connected to the form of networks.

The basis of the theoretical framework identifies the project networks as organizations that use resources and relationships for realizing activities and achieving results (Bianchi 2007).

P.M. not only constitutes a practice to plan, schedule and effectively execute projects, but represents a field of study in management, based on both the practical - empirical research and theoretical one in which organizational behavior, business strategy, management of resources and technologies concurrently interact (Solderlung, 2011). In this regard Kwak & Anbari (2009) have underlined that research on Project Management published in management journals in the period 1950 - 2007 concerned, in descending order: 1) Strategy and Portfolio Management; 2) Transactions and decisions; 3) Organizational behavior and human resource management; 4) Technology and informative systems; 5) Innovation; 6) Performance and value added; 7) Engineering and 8) Quality management.

The current basis of studies on P.M. is therefore connected to the quantitative research of planning techniques and to the application of engineering sciences and optimization theory (Soderlund 2004).

In recent years the turbulence and complexity (Kotler & Caslione 2009) have taken the place of stability and predictability pushing public and private organizations to adopt new organizational forms, including those for project, making the internal-external boundaries increasingly blurred (Grandori & Soda 1995).

Recent challenges connected to globalization, to crisis and diversity management, development and governance of proactive answers to the ever changing environment have easy-drawn within organizations the realization of changes in both the organizational design as in management processes. This has highlighted the passage from mechanical and bureaucratic models to those organic and flexible in its time proposed by Burns and Stalker (1961).

In this respect the organizational design is configured as the "realization of order or control of interdependent activities with respect to a result" (Isotta 2011). In particular, the need for a new design in project networks led organizations in addressing the problem of structure and process choice to be applied in the division of work packages and their coordina-

tion. These have come to not only cover several activities that take place inside the boundaries of the internal network of the project but also outside in the external relationships with stakeholders (Aragonés-Beltrán, García-Melón, & Montesinos-Valera, 2017).

Many scholars (Mir and Pinnington, 2014; Archibald 2009, Kerzner, 2009) analyzed the organizational perspective of the structure and the process in P.M.. The structure individuates the different positions may be hold by each unit in project networks such as: 1. Coordinator/Applicant; 2. Partners; 3. Stakeholders. EACEA¹ provides the following definitions: Coordinator/Applicant is a participating organisation that submits the project proposal on behalf of all the partners. It has the full responsibility to ensure that the project is implemented in accordance to the agreement with European Commission. It represents and acts on behalf of project partners; it bears the financial and legal responsibility for the proper operational, administrative and financial implementation of the entire project and it coordinates the project in cooperation with project partners. Instead Partners are those participating organisations which contribute actively to the achievement of project's objectives. Each partner signs a mandate to confer to the coordinating organisation the responsibility of acting as main beneficiary and act in his name during the implementation of the project.

As it regards Stakeholders, EACEA doesn't provide a specific definition but they can be considered as the external actors of local systems may be involved in the project realization with a role of supporter and promoter of project activities (Tampieri, Zaric 2007).

Among Coordinator-Partner-Stakeholder interests synergy and/or conflict situation may be created during the phases of project management influencing relationships as analyzed in previous researches undertaken by the Author (Tampieri 2013; 2010, 2011a,b; 2009b).

In particular, the submission phase is a sequence of activities in which the units carry out exploring and exploiting strategies.

The exploring prevails in the first step of projects network creation as the coordinator searches available partners to structure and implement the project. After this activity the more productive partners will be selected and exploited to finalize the submission process.

Thus the initial state of synergy among units about the project idea decision is converted in a conflict one as each unit presents specific interests in the project, often different from those of other units. At the end the state of synergy again emerged as a needed condition to submit the project.

Other studies underlined the connection between the performance of project networks and the organizational dimensions as the number of consortia units, the continuity of relationships and the ties interdependence (Bianchi, Tampieri 2011, Tampieri 2011a,b).

In this field the concerns related to the cooperation among organizations for project networks creation have been discussed by many scholars: Axelrod (1984) stated that the impulse to cooperate increases when the relationships among units are frequent and stable, the units are easily identifiable and there is sufficient information to recognize the action of all units inside the project networks. Morandin et al. (2001) studied the relational perspective of the identification process so that the creation of social relationships by the individuals or units inside the organization or project network is linked to the identification of the same with the belonging organization (Sluss, Ashforth 2007; Bartel, Dutton 2001). Borgatti and Foster (2003) reviewed the network paradigm underlining a wide variety of mainstreams such as: social capital, embeddedness, network organizations, organizational networks, board interlocks, joint ventures, alliances, knowledge management, social cognition and group processes. Moreover the nature, the intensity and the origin of the interdependences created in complex networks (Kickert et al. 1997; Teng, 2015) have been argued by many scholars (Knocke, Kuklinsky 1982; Martinez 2007; Miles, Snow 1986) with a particular focus on the mechanisms of coordination (Van de Ven, Walker 1984). The network as organizational structure with its flexibility and functioning logics has been studied by Nohria & Eccles (1992) and Powell (1990).

In project networks the frequency of the relationships among units influences the intensity of their identification in the consortium and so the convergence toward common targets (March & Simon 1958). This derives from the shared thinking that the behaviour of an unit is influenced not only by its peculiarities but also from the other units and the network (Steglich, Snijders, Pearson 2006). Rao, Davis and Ward (2000) stated that the increasing number of ties among units inside the project networks determines a higher probability that an unit derives the own social identity from the same network.

Summarizing the main concerns, discussed in the paper, we can state that the relationships may be developed among units determine the identification of each unit inside project networks and so the convergence into a common frame that is required for the

¹ The Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) is responsible for the management of certain parts of the EU's funding programmes in the fields of education, culture, audiovisual, sport, citizenship and volunteering. See https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/about-eacea_en.

accomplishment of different phases of project life cycle, particularly of submission and realization. On the basis of this theoretical framework the investigation is set on the following organizational elements that affect the international projects managed by Bologna

University in the period 2004-2013: 1. The ties interdependence developed by consortia units due to their shared participation in more than one project network; 2. The experience acquired by each unit owing to the years in which implementing P.M. activities.

Figure 1 - The project networks

Nr.	Project title	Financing Call	Year	Partnership				
				EU	Nr.	Western Balkan	Nr.	Tot
1	Education and technical assistance for the development of SMEs in the port district of Durres	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs	2004-2006	- University of Bologna - Didactical and Scientific Pole of Forli	1	- Taleda – Local Economic Development Agency - Unops - Pasarp	2	3
2	Start up of professional education and to the enterprise culture in Elbasan area with particular regard for weak categories	Emilia-Romagna Region Law	2007-2008	-Bologna University – Ser.In.Ar - Municipality of Cesena	1	- CFP – Professional Education centre in Elbasan - University of Elbasan - Municipality of Elbasan	3	4
3	Development and valorisation of local systems for the support of innovative SMEs in Albania, Bosnia and Serbia.	INTERREG	2007-2010	- University of Bologna - Didactical and Scientific Pole of Forli -Polytechnic University of Marche - University “G.D’Annunzio” of Chieti Pescara - Salento University - Forli-Cesena Province - Municipality of Forli -DART(Department of Environment, network and Territory) Chieti-Pescara University	7	- Belgrade University - Democratic Transition Initiative - Elbasan University - INIMA Institute of Informatics and Applied Mathematics-Tirana - Shkoder University - Sarajevo University - Novi Sad University - Autonomous Province of Vojvodina	8	15
4	Restoration and revitalization of Roman Amphitheatre. European experiences and applicability in Balkan countries. Exploratory seminar.	Central European Initiative – Cooperation Activity	2008-2010	-Bologna University – Ser.In.Ar -Parma University -Chieti- Pescara University -Civic Museum of Udine -University of Nimes -Municipality of Tarraco – Generalitat de Catalunya, -Museum Nacional de Tarragona -Municipality of Saragoza -Classic Archaeology Institut– Generalitat de Catalunya -Institut fir Kulturgeschichte der Antike in Carnuntum -Archaeology Institute, Capodistria	11	-University of Shkoder -Institute of culture Monuments -Cultural Estate Ministry Albanian Republic -Municipality of Durazzo -University of Durazzo -Belgrado University -Democratic Transition Initiative -University Kliment of Ohrid -Pula University – Faculty of Economics and Tourism -Mediterranean University of Podgorica	10	21
5	Regional Joint Doctoral Programme in Entrepreneurship and SME Management for Western Balkan Countries.	TEMPUS	2010-2013	-University of Bologna – Department of Management -Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona - University of Nice – Sophia Antipolis	3	- Dardania University -Agency for promotion of entrepreneurship in Macedonia -Macedonian Chamber of Commerce -Seavus doeel Skopje - Albanian Confederation -University “ St. Kliment Ohridski” Bitola -University of Tirana -Agricultural University of Tirana -South East European University	9	12

Unit	Project year										TOT
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	
a	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	10
b	1	1	1								3
c	1	1	1								3
d				1	1						2
e				1	1	1	1				4
f				1	1						2
g				1	1	1	1				4
h				1	1	1	1				4
i				1	1	1	1				4
l				1	1	1	1				4
m				1	1	1	1				4
n				1	1	1	1				4
o				1	1	1	1				4
p				1	1	1	1				4
q				1	1	1	1				4
r				1	1	1	1				4
s				1	1	1	1				4
t				1	1	1	1				4
u				1	1	1	1				4
v					1	1	1				3
w					1	1	1				3
y					1	1	1				3
z					1	1	1				3
aa					1	1	1				3
ab					1	1	1				3
ac					1	1	1				3
ad					1	1	1				3
ae					1	1	1				3
af					1	1	1				3
ag					1	1	1				3
ah					1	1	1				3
ai					1	1	1				3
al					1	1	1	1	1	1	6
am					1	1	1				3
an					1	1	1				3
ao							1	1	1	1	4
ap							1	1	1	1	4
aq							1	1	1	1	4
ar							1	1	1	1	4
as							1	1	1	1	4
at							1	1	1	1	4
au							1	1	1	1	4
av							1	1	1	1	4
aw							1	1	1	1	4
ax							1	1	1	1	4

Figure 5 - The experience of project units expressed by the years of units' presence in project networks (Y)

The remaining 38 units were involved in only one project.

In the period 2004-2013 the units established many direct ties with others deriving from the shared participation to more project networks (Figure 3).

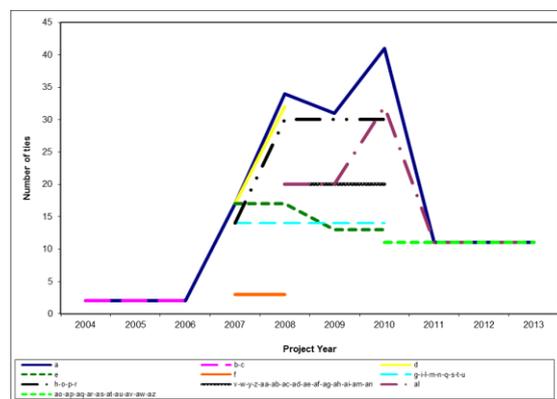
The variable “ties interdependence” (X) is measured by the number of direct ties established by each unit in project networks taking into account the specific network size (identified as the number of units of that project network) to which the unit takes part. UNIBO (“a”) manages 44 ties identified as projects' all partners. UNIBO is followed by the units “h”, “o”, “p”, “r”, “al” with 30 ties owing to their participation to more projects.

As each project is temporary with a start and an end, the time represents a very relevant dimension to be considered owing to the renewal of partners in project networks.

This is linked to the fact that the behaviour of project units is continuously submitted to the evaluation from other organizations when they seek to structure further initiatives. Therefore, it can happen that a partner works in a project managed by UNIBO in the period 2004 – 2006 and it has not been confirmed in other projects undertaken in 2007-2013.

The data about the distribution of units' presence over the years gave evidence that most of ties has been developed in 2008, 2009 and 2010 (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – The cycle of ties per year



In details, the cycle of ties distinguished per project duration year is based on the specific load of relationships hold by each unit : “a” has got a total number of 162 ties , “al” of 105 and “h” - “o” - “p” - “r” of 104. This calculation takes into account the different presence of project' networks over the years and the network size: in 2004-2006 only the nr.1 was realized; in 2007 nr.2 and 3; 2008 nr.2,3 and 4; 2009 nr.3 and 4 while from 2010 to 2013 the only nr. 5 was accomplished.

Unit	Ties interdependence (X)	Experience (Y)	Unit	Ties interdependence (X)	Experience (Y)
a	44	10	aa	20	3
b	2	3	ab	20	3
c	2	3	ac	20	3
d	3	2	ad	20	3
e	16	4	ae	20	3
f	3	2	af	20	3
g	14	4	ag	20	3
h	30	4	ah	20	3
i	14	4	ai	20	3
l	14	4	al	30	6
m	14	4	am	20	3
n	14	4	an	20	3
o	30	4	ao	11	4
p	30	4	ap	11	4
q	14	4	aq	11	4
r	30	4	ar	11	4
s	14	4	as	11	4
t	14	4	at	11	4
u	14	4	au	11	4
v	20	3	av	11	4
w	20	3	aw	11	4
y	20	3	ax	11	4
z	20	3			

Figure 6 – The organizational variables: ties interdependence (X) and experience (Y)

3.2 - Data on experience of partnership in project management

The other organizational variable that affects the behaviour in project networks is the time expressed by the years in which the units carried out project management activities increasing their experience and knowledge in this field.

This element is as a determinant of the behaviour that each unit can exercise on project networks in terms of influences on the definition and realization of activities and budget. If a partner carries out project management activities for many years, it increases the knowledge and skills in this field reducing the time of project governance in terms of a better implementation of coordination and communication mechanisms inside the network. In such a way the behaviour of some partners could affect the main project decisions that have to be taken in short time.

The variable “experience of partnership in project management” (Y) is therefore measured by the

number of years in which the units carried out project management activities (Figure 5).

To analyse the proposed hypothesis concerning the existence of a connection between X and Y, we summarize the detected and calculated data in the following Figure 6.

The descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation together with the Pearson correlation index have been used to study the connection between the variables X and Y.

4 – RESULTS

The results, reported in Figure 7, present the descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation (SD) together with the Pearson correlation index that shows the amount of association between the two variables: ties interdependence (X) and experience (Y).

As it regards the standard deviation the parameter Y presents a lower value (1,18) than X (8,25) owing to the gap between the minimum value (2) and the maximum one (10), while the values related to X range from 2 to 44. So there is more variability of data in X than in Y determining the significance of analysis data.

The Pearson correlation index, indicating the correlation between the variables (it ranges in size from a maximum of +1 to -1), is moderate (0,53) so that increasing value of X corresponds to an increasing value of Y.

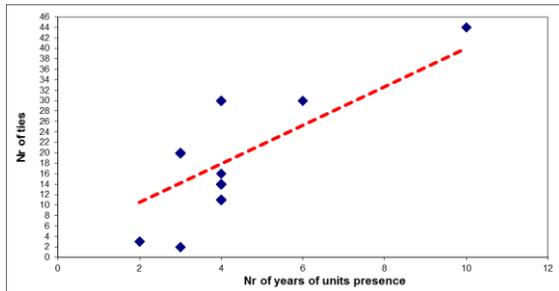
Figure 8 shows this trend confirming that the development of many project networks over the years has been happened through the consolidation and the creation of partnerships.

Figure 7 – Descriptive statistics and correlation Pearson index

Organizational variables	Mean	SD	Pearson Correlation Index
X	16,8	8,25	0,53
Y	3,7	1,18	

This result can be explained in two perspectives: the first refers to the fact that project networks units want to develop ties, mainly strong ones, with other units over the years. In this way such ties represent the basis of the cooperation willingness of units to prepare, submit and manage new projects. Secondly the continuous realization of project management activities for some units determines a selection and focus on particular units and thus specific ties with them.

Figure 8 – The connection between number of ties and of units' presence years



5 – CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

The paper analysed the connection between the organizational variables that affect the performance and behaviour in project networks established over five international projects of Bologna University in the period 2004-2013.

The results of this research underlined that there is a moderate correlation between the ties interdependence and the experience obtained by each single unit in project networks.

This link is particularly relevant in the analysis of the performance may be experienced by some units in project networks: the test of units' behaviour in a project identifies one of the main criteria for the coordinator to select adequate partners and to establish new ties.

The highlighted implications furtherly contributed to previous researches undertaken by the Author (Bianchi, Tampieri 2011; Tampieri 2010; Tampieri 2011a,b; 2013) in which the connection between the performance measured in the duration of projects preparation and respectively the number of consortia units and the continuity of relationships was outlined. The results of these studies pointed out that there was not relation between the performance and the number of partners in the project. As this dimension evidently affects the difficulties in coordinating activities of project management, it could mean that some additional resources could be activated to consolidate the level of performance when the number of project' partners increases.

Ties interdependence could be connected to cooperation willingness by units to prepare, submit and manage new projects. The continuous realization of project management activities for some units determines a selection of ties.

The research presents several limitations mainly linked to the specific peculiarities of analyzed cases. As each project can be considered as an unique initiative with a particular structure and process, this increases the difficulty to make wider generalization. Another organizational item is linked to limited vari-

ables and the exclusion of non-university organizations in the networks.

Moreover, the ties among project networks units have been considered only in the first order without considering the second and further orders as this research analysed the interdependence based on the shared participation of units and on the years of project management.

The paper has further contributed to the development of research on organizational aspects related to networks and ties that can be applied to project management.

Future research imperatives may be considered by further studies concern the use of variables as the number of e-mails exchanged among consortium partners, inter partners' feedback time, frequency and level of trust as determinants of performance may be achieved in the submission and realization of international projects. Another element is the widening of target countries added to Western Balkans and of other financing call typologies. In such a way the comparison could enrich the relevance of this research field.

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