



Guest Editorial

## Editorial: Managing strategic projects and programs in and between organizations

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### 1. Introduction

Set amid grand societal challenges coupled with shifting geopolitical landscapes, the environment in which contemporary organizations operate is increasingly unstable, surprising, and uncertain. Organizations need to adapt to such an operating environment while also anticipating and proactively driving changes to it (Shoemaker et al., 2018). Some changes reach such a scale that organizations must reconsider their respective missions and positions in the value chain (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998; Huy et al., 2014). Such transformations can be labeled *strategic*, renewing the foundations upon which organizations choose to operate. Strategic change typically involves “a redefinition of mission and purpose, and a substantial shift in goals, to reflect a new direction in response to environmental threats” (Balogun et al., 2016).

For organizations to attain their goals and fulfill their multiple value expectations (Lundin & Söderholm, 1995; Martinsuo & Hoverfält, 2018), they often use projects and programs to implement strategic change. Although some strategic changes are never explicitly labeled as projects or programs, they tend to effectively follow the logic of project-based operating. Implementing strategic transformation through projects and programs can provide the capacity for change (Stensaker, 2011) while allowing organizations to focus on business as usual. However, project-based organizing can also create challenges as projects and programs may become isolated from the permanent organization (Lehtonen & Martinsuo, 2009; Willems et al., 2020).

In this special issue, our focus is on the management of strategic projects and programs that drive change within an organization or between multiple organizations. *Strategic* here implies both business criticality and transformation orientation. The call for papers (Martinsuo et al., 2020) highlighted strategic projects and programs tied to organizational change, interorganizational ownership arrangements and collaboration, new business ventures and radical innovations, and megaprojects for creating new infrastructures. This special issue brings together some of these streams of research, initiates a powerful

cross-domain discourse on strategic projects and programs, and promotes idea generation for future research at the intersection of project studies and other management domains.

### 2. Overview of special-issue papers

The call for papers for this *International Journal of Project Management* special issue attracted 27 proposals, and 15 of the author teams were invited to participate in a paper development workshop and submit a full paper. The paper development workshop was used to help the authors focus their paper on the special-issue interests and align their papers better with project studies. After the author teams' full-paper submissions, a peer review process with two to four reviewers per paper and two to four rounds of revisions followed. In the last phases, the editors supported the authors' final modifications. This process resulted in 11 accepted full papers, which are now included in this special issue.

Taken together, the papers in this special issue focus on the challenges and mechanisms involved in managing strategic projects and programs. This includes both intraorganizational projects and programs that require implementing and diffusing the changes within a permanent organization and interorganizational projects and programs that require knowledge transfer, collaboration, and integration between organizations to achieve broader regional or societal transformation. The papers include reflections and suggestions on the theoretical underpinnings of strategic projects and programs and empirical studies that both feed the theoretical discourse and offer practical implications to the professionals leading strategic projects and programs. Fig. 1 presents an overview of the accepted papers.

As shown in Fig. 1, the papers featured in this special issue cover three major threads representing particularly novel and interesting contributions to the special-issue theme. We distinguish between topics (strategic ownership change, interorganizational collaboration and integration, and radical innovations) on the vertical axis and

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organizational levels (projects, programs, portfolios, and parent organizations) on the horizontal axis.

- 1 The papers in the first group, positioned at the top left corner of the figure and labeled 1, concern strategic ownership changes pursued via projects and programs, a theme that the prior research has not sufficiently covered.
- 2 The papers in the second group, positioned at the lower left corner of the figure and labeled 2, deal with interorganizational collaboration via strategic projects and programs.
- 3 The papers in the third group, positioned at the top right corner of the figure and stretching into the middle of the figure, and labeled 3, connect projects and programs with the parent organization(s).

As the figure suggests, some papers cover multiple organizational levels and topics. However, in the following, we describe each paper only once, in line with its main contribution.

### 3. The role of projects and programs in strategic ownership changes

The papers in the first group focus on the implementation of strategic ownership changes through projects and programs. The types of strategic ownership change studied in this special issue relate to corporate restructuring and growth via mergers and acquisitions (M&A) and divestments. The two can be considered mirror images of each other and arguably represent the most important strategic ownership changes for organizations. While M&A concerns the purchase of part of or an entire organization, divestments typically focus on selling a unit or a specific part of a business venture.

The guiding idea for the papers is *connecting two fields of research (project studies and strategic ownership change)* that have been largely disconnected to date. This disconnect is surprising given that project-based terminology and approaches are used in practice by managers and organizations when implementing strategic ownership changes. Thus, research has arguably lagged behind in making this connection, largely because these topics have been studied in different research areas. This problem reflects a broader issue of project-based theorizing that could benefit from a better connection with strategic management and organization theories (Martinsuo & Geraldi, 2020; Sydow & Braun, 2018). This special issue starts addressing this need by showing how concepts from project studies help support the conceptualization of strategic ownership change in novel and innovative ways.

Extant research posits that the implementation of post-merger/acquisition and divestments has typically been viewed via an integration or divestment process (Haspeslagh & Jemison, 1991) perspective. In contrast, projects and programs offer a temporally bound organizational

perspective on the implementation of strategic ownership change. The papers featured in this section make an important contribution to extant research by adding temporariness to the prevailing process perspective of strategic ownership change management.

Geraldi et al. (2022) consider projects, programs, and portfolios as alternative modes of organizing. Their conceptual paper theorizes at the intersection of project studies and M&A research. The authors argue that organizations can choose among alternative modes of organizing (i.e., projects, programs, or portfolios) when planning and implementing M&A. Depending on which mode of organizing is adopted, managing the M&A can take very different shapes in terms of the integration process, integration outcome, and temporal process–outcome interface. As a key contribution to this special issue, the paper presents the viewpoint of a firm’s project-based theory, connecting projects with firms’ growth and renewal. The alternative temporary modes of organizing are firms’ strategic mechanisms for organizing their growth and renewal. When project studies are connected with strategic management in this way, new research opportunities emerge for building bridges between temporary and long-term organizing, between organizations, and at research field intersections.

The paper of Bansal et al. (2022) presents a program management perspective on acquisitions. In so doing, the paper contributes to the special issue by connecting the hitherto largely disconnected studies on program and acquisition management. The paper draws from a study that used interviews to investigate how managers frame change and influence the sensemaking of other people influenced by the acquisition. A model of managerial sensemaking and sensegiving in acquisitions is developed in three phases: the pre-acquisition, standby, and post-acquisition periods. The study’s findings highlight how managers iteratively make and give sense during a complex acquisition program and the importance of a standby period between the pre- and post-acquisition phases for evaluating the unique context of each acquisition. Going forward, the paper develops a future research agenda connecting program management research with acquisition research, calling for more research at their intersection.

Harikkala-Laihinen’s (2022) paper draws attention to the transition that occurs in a firm’s organizational identity (i.e., the perception of “who we are”) when the firm’s ownership is changed. This paper shows that strategic change programs change not only the organization but also its identity. This empirical study explores a previously family-owned firm that switched to capital investor ownership by mapping the firm’s identity transition and discontinuity experiences that eventually led to the emergence of a new organizational identity. The paper makes an important contribution by revealing the layer of organizational identity as part of strategic change programs while highlighting the mental and social aspects of leading change programs. Additionally, the paper highlights ownership change as a specific form

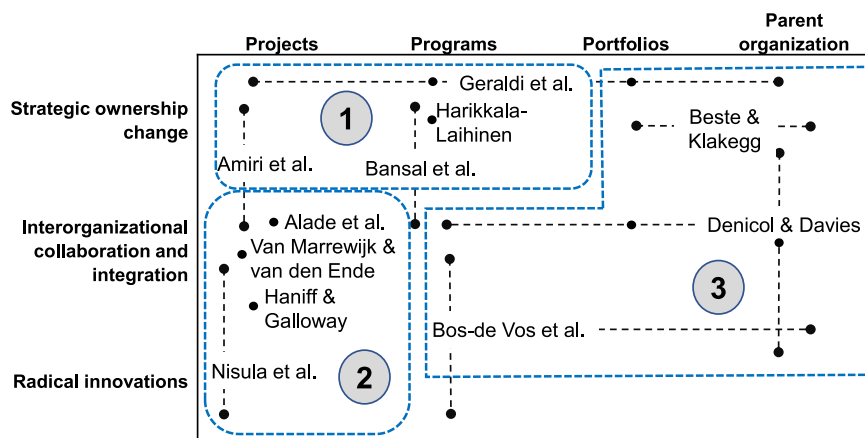


Fig. 1. Overview of the papers featured in this special issue.

of strategic program that is particularly sensitive to discontinuity in organizational identity.

The paper of Amiri et al. (2022) focuses on divestitures as corporate restructuring projects, assessing how their implementation and outcomes can benefit from stakeholder management. This review paper's novelty lies in its consideration of a project and stakeholder management approach to divestments. The authors argue that divestment research considers only a small set of stakeholders, thereby ignoring many stakeholder types. Considering stakeholders during divestment projects influences the selection of the divestiture mode. While a project management perspective is largely missing from divestment research, such a perspective would enable addressing stakeholder concerns across divestment types, consequently promoting the success of divestments. Moreover, the organization's stakeholder orientation matters, particularly when the organization undertakes complex, strategic projects such as divestments. A research agenda connecting these three fields of inquiry is offered.

#### 4. Strategic projects as interorganizational collaborative endeavors

Four papers focus on strategic projects that harness the resources of multiple organizations in networks to achieve strategic change together. When multiple organizations are involved in project networks, they may all have their own strategies and goals, but the overarching project goal binds their efforts together (Arto et al., 2008). The organizations all possess different degrees of power in the project, thereby varying in their possibilities of influencing the project and its outcomes. The papers illustrate the tensions, collaboration challenges, and power relations involved when many actors come together to work on a joint project. In addition, the papers provide important insights into how such complex endeavors can be effectively governed and organized to foster knowledge creation.

One of the emerging contributions of the papers in this section is the recognition of the role of projects in *addressing major societal and grand challenges* in interorganizational settings. Societal problems and grand challenges are so complex that no individual or organization can single-handedly solve or address them. In addition, employing innovation to address grand challenges requires investments and long-term research and development, emphasizing knowledge sharing and transfer in and between organizations. Therefore, efforts to address societal and grand challenges are often organized in projects bringing together private and public organizations within and across countries. When strategic projects involve multiple organizations, collaboration and integration problems increase exponentially with the number of organizations involved. The complexity of the context requires that strategic projects serve multiple needs and value expectations.

The paper of Haniff & Galloway (2022) focuses on modeling strategic alignment in project networks. The goal of the study was to develop a model of how collaborating organizations in a project network achieve their respective strategic objectives while realigning these with the project's objectives. The empirical study was a multiple-case study of four public-sector construction projects, all involving a network of organizations with overlapping boundaries in each of the projects. Through an analysis of the internal and external tensions in the network, it was found that effective project governance and leadership and the handling of client complexity are critical to successful alignment. This study contributes to our understanding of collaboration in multi-actor networks involving public-sector projects and how subcontractors realign their strategic objectives to contribute to the success of the project. As contractors may cooperate with the same complex clients and/or partners in several projects, the study invites further research concerning the strategic motivations of partners' involvement and serial collaborative projects over time.

The paper of van Marrewijk & van den Ende (2022) focuses on how power relations and strategic practices shape interorganizational

projects. This paper draws on an ethnographic study of a strategic project involving nine companies. The goal of the project was to improve collaboration in the joint planning, funding, coordination, and realization of the construction and maintenance of utilities and telecom networks. Local governments no longer allow single firms in the network to do such work on their own. The paper illustrates how various power relations and strategic practices at different levels can reshape the process and influence the ultimate outcome, in this case the termination of the project. While some strategic practices smoothen or rebalance existing power relations, others serve to maintain or strengthen existing power relations. The paper contributes to the special issue and literature by demonstrating how entangled power relations and strategic practices can shape complex collaborative change projects between organizations.

Nisula et al. (2022) investigated the organization of knowledge creation in a strategic interorganizational innovation project. Their paper is positioned at the intersection of interorganizational innovations, managing strategic projects, and knowledge management. New knowledge is sought, particularly concerning the ways in which multiple organizations organize knowledge creation in interorganizational strategic innovation projects. The case study concerned a high-technology innovation project within a broader research program. The organization of knowledge creation is categorized into an iterative, cyclic joint process, self-organized groups, and dynamic participation. The paper's key contributions relate to the iterativeness, situation specificity, and informality of knowledge creation in interorganizational innovation projects. The authors encourage further research to observe knowledge creation in interorganizational settings ethnographically, in real time, to reveal how the organizing practices unfold.

Alade et al. (2022) investigated cross-national collaboration in strategic transport projects and its link to benefits realization. The purpose of their study was to examine the collaboration challenges of an international consortium of organizations involved in the development of a complex and at times ambiguous strategic transport project in a developing country. The multi-method longitudinal case study design was used to understand the collaboration challenges between the various organizations during the pre-planning, development, and operation phases and their effect on the final benefits desired from the project, including those related to costs, pricing, accessibility, information, frequency, and infrastructure. The paper contributes to the special issue by illustrating the wide range of coordination and collaboration required between the organizations in a strategic-level transport project throughout the entire project life cycle of front-end, implementation, and benefits realization.

#### 5. Connecting strategic projects and programs with parent organizations

One key challenge of strategic projects and programs in implementing change is their relationship with the permanent organization. Interorganizational projects involve multiple parent organizations, each with its unique context and expectations. Strategic change must be designed to be carried out in context, with awareness of the parent organizations' unique circumstances, nature, and requirements. In addition, the parent organizations may offer resources, support, and guidance and may have a specific level of readiness to absorb and benefit from the results of the projects and programs. Three papers in this special issue connect projects and programs with one or more parent organizations.

The papers draw attention to the *systemic nature of certain strategic changes* and, consequently, the multi-level logic of their influence. They highlight costs, context shaping, and capability building across organizational levels and boundaries. Whatever occurs concerning these at the level of a project has a linkage to the program level and to the parent organization(s), and its influence is bidirectional. In addition, the parent organizations' strategic pursuits are embedded into the micro-actions

that take place and the decisions made in single projects and programs and by certain project actors. Together, the papers extend the view from project-based learning and knowledge transfer to projects as mechanisms for building an organization's strategic capabilities. The creation of strategic capabilities occurs over long periods of time and may require many projects and programs in sequence and parallel to each other. These papers thereby add another powerful viewpoint to considering strategic projects vehicles for the growth and renewal of organizations.

Beste & Klakegg (2022) examined strategic changes toward cost-efficient public construction projects. The goal of their study was to identify, through action research, how an organization improved the strategic cost efficiency of its portfolio of construction projects. This included aligning the objectives of the initiative with the organizational strategy and learning how to strategically transfer the knowledge gained from each project to the organization's other ongoing and future projects. The application of an organizational-sociology perspective to the initiative facilitated the transfer of project knowledge to the organizational portfolio at the strategic level. The paper contributes to the special issue by illustrating the challenges and rewards of implementing a strategic initiative to capture knowledge about how to attain cost efficiency at the project level and how to apply it at the strategic portfolio level.

The paper of Bos-de Vos et al. (2022) concerns navigating multiple contexts to integrate system transformation programs. It discusses how multi-actor programs are integrated into multiple parent organizations to address complex societal problems, specifically system-level transformations within healthcare. Drawing on a qualitative field study, the authors show the micro-actions and decisions through which program actors navigate multiple contexts over time. New ways of organizing are integrated through three micro-practices: aligning contexts, prioritizing contexts, and adding previously uninvolved new contexts. Integration occurs along multiple parallel paths that fan out, where breakdowns and decoupled paths play an important and somewhat surprising role. This paper contributes to the special issue and literature by illustrating how collaboration can take place in an increasingly decoupled way and how breakdowns can move the process forward. Furthermore, the study findings show how participants can actively shape the context rather than simply respond to and deal with the context at hand.

Denicol & Davies (2022) investigated program management capability and how firms build it to undertake and deliver megaprojects. They studied a project-based firm that handled multiple megaprojects and had the strategic aim of developing a set of capabilities for managing these types of major programs in a variety of markets and sectors. The capabilities desired included both hard and soft skills in both the technical and management areas. Involvement in megaprojects requires coordination between multiple contractors and subcontractors and between them and the client firm. The megaproject-based firm grows its capabilities when implementing multiple strategic projects one after another by learning and acquiring new knowledge from its various megaprojects and then integrating and applying it within the firm itself. This knowledge from outside the boundaries of the firm also helps drive and change the strategies of the firm, allowing it to capture future megaproject businesses. The paper contributes by connecting project-specific interorganizational capacity building with program-level intraorganizational capability building, and presents a powerful example of how projects can influence firm growth and evolution (as proposed in Geraldi et al. 2022).

## 6. Contributions

A main contribution of this special issue is recognizing and emphasizing the *strategic position of projects and programs in shaping the future trajectory of organizations*, be it in intraorganizational or interorganizational settings. What is considered strategic in an organization is very often handled through projects and programs, including efficiency improvement, resolving major industrial and societal concerns,

purposive growth, and the creation of new offerings and markets. The papers in this special issue build bridges between project studies and selected subfields of strategic and organization management and thereby show possibilities of enriching our understanding of both domains.

A second, more specific contribution of this special issue is recognizing the role of projects and programs in *an organization's ownership change*, such as M&A or divestments. In so doing, this special issue connects these fields of inquiry and draws attention to the essential questions regarding an organization's existence, growth, and competitive positioning. While ownership changes have been pursued through projects and programs for years, academic research has lagged behind. This contribution is important as it introduces a new building block and alternative modes of organizing to the implementation of strategic ownership change. It also reminds project researchers of ownership change as a specific project or program type, or even a project portfolio, and as an example of highly uncertain, interorganizational, and strategically significant transformations worth investigating.

Third, this special issue introduces projects, programs, and portfolios as *modes of organizing*. In so doing, the papers featured in this special issue advance the level of theorizing from perceiving projects as isolated entities to perceiving them as influential, interorganizational mechanisms that organizations can use to shape their futures. At the same time, projects, programs, and portfolios cannot be treated only as different levels but also as alternative organizing modes. Thus, they need to be considered alongside the purely hierarchical and transactional modes of organizing and deserve their own theoretical treatment.

Fourth, some of the papers featured in this special issue draw attention to the *cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of projects and programs*, especially in the decisions and actions of managers, personnel, and stakeholders. Several papers reveal the often-hidden sides of projects, where individuals interpret their surroundings, share their observations with others, use their power to influence others, transfer knowledge in and between organizations, and establish emotional bonds with each other, with the project, or with the parent organization. Although the papers do not necessarily use the project-as-practice view or critical project management for theoretical framing, they show many examples of real-life practices deviating from official routines or plans. Again, this clearly reflects the sociocultural dimensions of strategic project-based activity and empowers project personnel as powerful agents of strategic change. Projects and programs may define the project members' organizational identities as much as individuals can shape the future of the organization through projects.

## 7. Possibilities for future research

Several new pathways for future research are suggested at the end of each paper, and we present six broader research possibilities based on them and the guest editors' discussions on topics *not* covered by this special issue. Even though many of the papers featured in this special issue deal with *strategic change*, we feel that there is a need for an even stronger interdomain discourse between project studies and strategic change. While strategic changes are generally pursued through projects and programs, the terms are used vaguely, and the frameworks of strategic changes do not always acknowledge learning from project studies. Academic inquiry into strategic changes will likely benefit from additional project-based theorizing. Important connection points between these domains include time and rhythm, the importance of the project front end in building readiness and momentum for change, and the integration and purposive isolation of the change project and the parent organization. In addition, various aspects of multi-project organizing, both in terms of parallel changes (portfolio) and sequential changes (lineage), can be useful in strengthening future research on managing strategic changes.

In connection with strategic change, the papers in this compilation call attention to the individuals in charge of projects and programs while



crossing the boundaries between different organizations. Change and innovation management research acknowledges the important roles of change agents (e.g., leaders, managers, and consultants) and boundary spanners (e.g., promoters, technology scouts, and brokers), whereas project studies often emphasize the central roles of project managers and owners or clients. Generally, this centrality of individuals encourages further research concerning the *agency of different individuals* at different levels of the organization and in the different organizations participating in projects and programs. There is a need to investigate such agency more broadly than just among the key persons, the way in which any individual is empowered to lead changes, and the practices for legitimizing, selling, and mobilizing the changes. In addition, the selection of individuals for strategic project tasks and the termination of their duties deserve further attention.

Beyond strategic ownership change, project studies offer opportunities for informing the study of other types of change, including *inter-organizational partnerships, networks, and ecosystems*. Various forms of interorganizational partnering resemble ownership changes in terms of connecting two or more organizations together and combining temporariness and permanence. For example, joint ventures, alliances, outsourcing, franchising, licensing, and supply chain agreements all include temporary project-like initiation and transformation episodes while at the same time representing a pursuit of continuity and even permanence in the partnership to attain the agreed-upon goals of the collaboration. To complement this special issue, there are opportunities to theorize on the management of strategic projects and programs in interorganizational partnerships, networks, and ecosystems.

Additionally, we call for more empirical research and conceptual, interdisciplinary theorizing on projects and programs as *modes of organizing*. This will open up the prospect of seeing projects and programs not as managerial means but as temporally bound ways of shaping strategic change initiatives and the future trajectories of the organizations involved. While projects and programs alter organizations, they also provide opportunities to retheorize what organizations are, how they grow, how they collaborate, how they address grand challenges, and how they make impacts in society. We call for more connections between management and project studies, recognizing projects and programs as temporally bound units of analysis with the potential to shape organizations. Future scholarly inquiry is needed to use project-based concepts and theorizing to extend existing theories of management, organizations, strategic change, and societal governance.

Many of the papers featured in this special issue reflect conditions of great *uncertainty and risk* and present activities for mitigating and resolving these, but uncertainties and risks do not guide the theoretical framing of the papers. Future research could investigate these uncertainties in strategic and interorganizational projects and then codify the mitigation activities undertaken to address the potential risks involved. Furthermore, the existing project literature could benefit from deeper insights into the resilience needed to manage projects and programs amid the continuous and increasing uncertainty and ambiguity in the operating environment.

In closing, projects and programs are potential vehicles for promoting sustainability with regard to improving societal well-being and mitigating climate and biodiversity crises. Interest in sustainable project management is increasing. Realizing ecologically *sustainable futures* requires a systemic shift in governance, societal and economic systems, and lifestyles. There is a need to build bridges between project studies and relevant research domains, such as sustainability science, environmental management, and environmental economics. Theorizing sustainable futures via projects and programs can provide powerful conceptual lenses for facilitating the transition toward sustainable societies.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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