Managing legitimacy: The Christchurch post-disaster reconstruction

KEYWORDS

- **Stakeholder engagement**
- **Participatory project management**
- **Alliance structures**
- **Legitimacy issues**
- **Legitimation strategies**

Article Highlight:

This paper looks at the management of large scale, post-disaster reconstruction in Christchurch, New Zealand, following a major earthquake. It examines how innovative organisational and operational structures were used to collectively manage and implement 600 parallel projects and identifies the critical elements that might be relevant to comparable projects.

What does the paper cover?

The authors examine how the structure and operation of the Stronger Christchurch Infrastructure Rebuild Team (SCIRT) enabled it to meet the challenge of restoring the city's infrastructure following a major earthquake. This was the largest infrastructure project in the country's history and had to be achieved within extremely tight timeframes. Drawing on literature about the management of post-disaster reconstruction projects in general, the authors evaluate SCIRT in terms of four main themes: structure; workflow; collaboration versus competition; and, crucially, the legitimation strategies required for this type of programme to be effective.

THE CHARTERED BODY FOR THE PROJECT PROFESSION

Methodology:

The researchers collected data through: interviews with senior executives; staff focus groups; and SCIRT internal documents such as surveys, interview summaries and reports. Recorded data was transcribed and coded and findings were evaluated in relation to the four themes.

Research findings:

SCIRT was tasked with delivering urgent, large-scale reconstruction work under difficult circumstances, characterised by constrained resources, a heavy and complex workload and tight timeframes. This required it to achieve legitimacy among stakeholders and the wider community.

As identified in the literature, disaster situations require rapid responses, flexibility and quick results. SCIRT was based around an innovative form of alliance structure, comprising eight stakeholders – three funder groups (central government's earthquake recovery and transport agencies, and local government), along with five delivery organisations (which would normally be in competition). This non-standard structure moved away from a conventional funder-client separation, and instead was based around collaboration between all parties in the venture. The organisation had three main elements, relating to governance, central services and delivery of outcomes.

The alliance structure eliminated time-consuming tendering and promoted the sharing of resources, knowledge and risk. Workflow and processes were customised, and hundreds of projects overlapped or ran simultaneously. An integrated services team was responsible for planning and costing, and the five partner construction companies provided delivery teams, each with its own leadership team, who communicated both horizontally and vertically within the organisation. In practice, this structure was flexible, with 'functional groups' drawing together staff with the right expertise for particular areas of work.

Project managers used multi-criteria assessment tools to prioritise projects and plan workflows. Processes were designed for efficiency and timely delivery, eliminating bottlenecks and focusing on 'gateways' – non-negotiable deadlines. Close links were forged between planners and implementers to streamline operations, and quality control was delegated to the delivery teams.

A core element of this model was the balance between collaboration and competition. The five contractors initially each took on equal shares of the work, but their shares were then adjusted based on performance. A 'pain and gain' system meant that contractors were paid the actual cost of their work and any profit or loss was pooled. This encouraged knowledge sharing and collaboration. For example, the SCIRT safety standards combined the highest standards from each of the five participating contractors. Meanwhile, a competitive element was retained by measuring the performance of the five companies against key performance indicators including cost-effectiveness, community engagement, productivity, quality and safety. Better performing companies were then given higher work allocations.

As this type of approach was non-conventional, and the organisation depended on public support and funding, a key challenge was to achieve legitimacy – to banish the mistrust that some people felt towards a new organisation commanding a large budget. This meant matching or exceeding the efficacy of a market model while demonstrating the success of the alliance structure.

Legitimation strategies were needed for both those involved in SCIRT (internal legitimacy) and members of the wider community (external legitimacy).

Internal legitimacy was based around a shared 'noble purpose' of serving the city, and promoted through a performance-oriented culture, emphasising collaboration and learning. A Peak Performance Plan promoted core values: effective leadership, knowledge sharing, teamwork, personal wellbeing and operational excellence. The 'pain and gain' system fostered mutual support, and an 'innovation register' was set up to collect, evaluate and share insights and discoveries that reduced cost and improved the quality and speed of the work.

External legitimacy was promoted through communication about SCIRT's effective performance. Particular attention was drawn to the high quality of the outputs, achieved through strong personal and team relationships. Scrutiny by external agencies ensured the legitimacy of the governing body or board.

SCIRT's profile was raised when it won a number of local and international awards and was further strengthened by its 'learning legacy', whereby the knowledge and resources that were developed remain publicly available for local and international groups.

Conclusions:

The case study reveals that an alliance structure can be a very effective approach to public project management, provided that legitimacy issues are effectively addressed. It can ensure a well resourced, collaborative, innovative consortium able to deliver under pressure – in this case, some 600 time-sensitive reconstruction projects in Christchurch. SCIRT's people-led, rather than process-led, structure (which included client participation) was seen as significant. Legitimacy was seen as both a vital component and a key outcome.

Significance of the research:

The authors believe their findings can be applied in practice, and extended in future research, to enhance future large scale, time-pressured work programmes, including disaster recovery programmes.

Complete article

The original version of this article was published in the *International Journal of Project Management*, Vol number 35.5, B Walker, H P de Vries, V Nilakant (2017) p. 853–863. It can be accessed via: **sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/ S0263786316300576**

For further information please visit **apm.org.uk/research**. Please contact us with your views and suggestions at **research@apm.org.uk**.

apmRESEARCH

Association for Project Management

Ibis House, Regent Park
Summerleys Road,
Princes Risborough
Buckinghamshire,
HP27 9LE

Tel (UK) 0845 458 1944
Tel (Int) +44 1844 271 640
Email research@apm.org.uk
Web apm.org.uk

Glossary:

Alliance structures   Project management structures that enable stakeholders and delivery
                                 organisations to work in partnership.

Legitimation strategies   Strategies used within project management to achieve the trust
                                 of stakeholders.