

# Teargas, taboo and transformation: A neo-institutional study of community resistance and the struggle to legitimize subway projects in Amsterdam 1960–2018



Leonore van den Ende and Alfons van Marrewijk, *International Journal of Project Management* 37 (2019) p.331– 346

## KEYWORDS

- Infrastructure project
- Neo-institutional lens
- Legitimacy
- Community resistance
- Local embeddedness

## Article highlight:

This research draws from a longitudinal study of two large-scale infrastructure projects in Amsterdam to build two subway lines: the East line (1965–1980) and the North-South line (1995-2018). While both projects served as important means for urban renewal and development in Amsterdam, they were met with fierce community resistance in protection of the historic city. This resistance, in turn, prompted institutional work by project actors in their ongoing attempt to acquire legitimacy and embed these projects into the Amsterdam community over time.

## What does the paper cover?

This paper applies a neo-institutional lens to investigate how project actors who plan and implement large-scale infrastructure projects respond to resistance and aim to acquire legitimacy from their environment. Moving beyond traditional institutional perspectives that provide a rationalistic and economic view with a focus on efficiency, control and regulation, a neo-institutional lens provides a humanistic view with an emphasis on social, cultural and political dynamics in the ongoing pursuit of legitimacy.

## Methodology:

For the East line subway project the authors carried out a retrospective study and secondary document analysis of archival data, including secondary interviews and news reports, photographs, documentaries and academic sources. For the North-South line, as well as a retrospective study and document analysis, they were also able to conduct qualitative field research, including participant observation and in-depth interviewing. As a resident of Amsterdam, the first author kept up to date with the project's progress in the city, as well as gathering information on Facebook, Twitter, online blogs and through the official project websites.

## Research findings:

From the research, there are three main insights on the relation between large-scale infrastructure projects and their environment:

1. The dynamic and recursive interrelation between the two large-scale projects and their institutional context followed similar processes. Initially, both projects did little to embed the projects in their local context, which generated much social unrest and community resistance.
2. A gradual transformation was facilitated in terms of three consecutive 'approaches of institutionalisation' used by project actors to gain legitimacy for the project over time: administrative, technocratic and humanistic.
3. Institutional work is vital in the pursuit of legitimacy. Project actors had to respond to the belief systems and cultural schemas prevailing in the local community, which required a more humanistic approach of institutionalisation.

## Conclusions:

The main implication of the research is that institutionalisation comprises the strategic crafting of social and symbolic practices directed at gaining the acceptance and support of affected stakeholders. In the 21st century of democratic societies, project legitimisation not only depends on the administrative authority and technological expertise aimed at the financial and physical construction of large-scale infrastructure projects, but increasingly on the institutional work directed at the social construction of such projects.

## Significance of the research:

This study helps to encourage project actors to open up their projects to local communities and stakeholders. Managing large-scale infrastructure projects should no longer be carried out behind fences, depend on state-of-the-art technology or repress or hide from social conflicts and resistance. Instead, constructing these projects, especially in urban settings, requires innovative and creative ways for gaining support and acceptance from external stakeholders, giving local communities a more meaningful say in their construction and operation, and absorbing their self-induced shocks.

## Comments from the authors:

The North-South subway line was officially delivered to the Amsterdam local community on 21 July 2018. Now that the subway is in full operation, resistance has subsided and many residents enjoy the use of the subway. Nevertheless, the long historic struggle of subway construction in Amsterdam left project actors with important lessons: no project is an island and no project can be successfully constructed and locally embedded without the involvement and support of the local community.

## Complete article

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## Glossary:

### Neo-institutional lens

A neo-institutional lens comes from neo-institutional theory, which is one of the main theoretical perspectives used to understand organisational behaviour as situated in and influenced by other organisations and wider social forces.

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