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Struggling with strategizing in public client organisations: Managing strategic projects in inter-organisational contexts

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ABSTRACT

The efficiency of using strategic projects to accelerate long-term change is questioned, especially in inter-organisational contexts. Strategic projects operationalised in inter-organisational contexts are decoupled from the parent – permanent – organisation, creating a need for project actors to manage in-between. The aim of this paper is to increase the understanding of practices for managing strategic projects in inter-organisational contexts, initiated by public client organisations. Applying a practice perspective, this paper presents a case study exploring a strategic project to test collaborative contracting in road maintenance contracts for a public infrastructure client in Sweden. The findings revealed a lack of structure regarding both participation and responsibilities, as well as uncertainties and ambiguities with respect to the goal of the strategic change. The study shows how strategic practices move from central units at the permanent organisational level to the contract level where the strategic project is operationalised and tested, isolating the project and making project actors act as middle managers in-between the project and parent organisation. Thus, the study contributes with a discussion on the efficiency of strategizing through projects in public organisations, especially those operating in a network of suppliers through outsourcing.

1. Introduction

Strategic projects are frequently used to accelerate change toward a wider transformation within and across organisational boundaries (Balogun, Hailey & Gustafsson, 2016; Martinsuo, Teerikangas, Stensaker & Meredith, 2022). However, it has been questioned how effective strategic projects are in producing such transformation, due to, for example, difficulties in sharing knowledge between a project and the parent organisation (Lehtonen & Martinsuo, 2009; Willems, van Marrewijk, Kuitert, Volker & Hermans, 2020). Driving change through a strategic project is considered especially challenging if efforts are carried out in collaboration with multiple external partners in inter-organisational networks (DeFilippi & Sydow, 2016; van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022). Such broader networks of actors are characterised by complex power relations, which must be understood by the organisation initiating an inter-organisational strategic project (Haniff & Galloway, 2022). Furthermore, when strategic projects are initiated and managed by public organisations, the expectations come not only from contracting partners, but also from political stakeholders and citizens, creating a multiplicity of demands and values (Kuitert, Volker & Hermans, 2019; Zerjav, McArthur & Edkins, 2021).

In some public organisational settings, the demand for strategic change to meet societal challenges is particularly high. One such sector is the provision of transport infrastructure, including the construction, renewal, and maintenance of new roads and railroads. Due to the influence of decades of the new public governance logic, many public infrastructure owners now carry out most of their services through contracts with external suppliers. This applies to one-off construction projects, as well as to more regular operations and maintenance work. As a consequence, more actors become involved or act as stakeholders in strategic change initiatives (Brorström and Norbäck, 2024; Rosenberg-Hansen, Pop, Skov & George, 2022). This affects implementation, since strategic practices are even more challenging when strategic projects involve and affect multiple organisations, at a sector or ecosystem level (van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022).

It is increasingly acknowledged that strategic practices and initiatives are not only the responsibility of top managers: recent research emphasises the need to also understand the roles of middle managers in such change processes (Brorström & Willems, 2023; Bryson, Edwards & Van Slyke, 2018; Löwstedt, Räisänen & Leiringer, 2018; Whittington,

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2019). This is especially relevant when the strategic project is decoupled from the parent – permanent – organisation; making use of its results becomes a question of balancing the forces of integration and autonomy (Bakker, DeFillippi, Schwab & Sydow, 2016). As such, Willems et al. (2020) describe how practices of isolation can enable innovation in projects, and van Marrewijk (2017) illustrates how project actors expand their autonomy during project execution against the will of the parent organisation.

The aim of this paper is to increase the understanding of practices for managing strategic projects in inter-organisational contexts, initiated by public client organisations. To fulfil this aim, a case study was carried out exploring a strategic project for testing collaborative approaches in road maintenance contracts procured by a public infrastructure client in Sweden.

The findings revealed a lack of structure regarding both participation and responsibilities, as well as uncertainties and ambiguities with respect to the goal of the strategic change, where managers had to navigate a range of organisational strategies. However, contrary to the findings of van Marrewijk (2017), the isolation of the project in the present case occurred as the parent organisation distanced itself from the strategic project when high-level strategies shifted over time. From a practice perspective (Jarzabkowski, Lê & Feldman, 2012), the study shows how strategic practices move from central units at the permanent organisational level to the contract level, isolating the project and making the Manager of contract act as middle managers in-between the strategic project and parent organisations. Thus, the study contributes to the discussion of the efficiency of strategizing through projects in public organisations, especially those operating in a network of suppliers through outsourcing.

The outline of the paper is as follows: in the first section, a Theoretical background covers the current understanding of practices for managing strategic projects from a strategy-as-practice perspective, with a specific focus on public organising, in order to establish research questions. The Methods section presents how the strategic project in a public client organisation has been followed through interviews and observations and how the strategy-as-practice perspective enabled an analysis of the bridging roles between project and parent organisation. Next, in the Findings section, it is presented how the strategic project became increasingly isolated, and how this implied that the Managers of contract became more of middle managers, strategizing in-between the project and the central levels. This is further developed in the Discussion section, where the research questions are answered by elaborating on the inter-organisational relationships and the project isolation, leading to a discussion on how public strategic projects are not just carried out for transformation but also for creating legitimacy. This opens up for contributions, presented in the last section, to project management literature on strategizing in inter-organisational contexts and on the specificities of strategic projects in public client organisations. Here, limitations are also discussed and developed into suggestions for further studies on how a project logic affects operational work and for longitudinal studies to understand the possible implications of strategic projects in an ever-shifting public context.

2. Theoretical background

The literature overview starts by presenting a strategic-as-practice lens, also describing consequentiality as a frame to explore actors and their practices in strategic projects. This is followed by a discussion of the current understanding of strategic projects, with a specific focus on managerial roles and practices. The context of public organising is also elaborated on, before ending with the formulation of research questions.

2.1. A strategy-as-practice perspective

The practice turn within strategy research has given rise to the research field of strategy-as-practice, representing an ontological shift from viewing strategy as formal plans towards an understanding of strategy work as a social practice (Whittington, 1996). This view of strategy originates from Mintzberg's (1978) concept of deliberate and emergent strategies. Emergent strategies are not planned, and realised despite, or in the absence of, intentions (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985), thus fostering interest in strategic activities that diverge from top-down intentions. Strategy-as-practice is the study of doing strategy in organisational contexts (Jarzabkowski, Balogun & Seidl, 2007; Vaara & Whittington, 2012). Therefore, strategy-as-practice allows for viewing strategizing as both deliberate and emergent activities that are consequential for the goals of an organisation (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003). Söderlund & Maylor (2012) identified the integration of early planning and implementation of strategy as one of the primary challenges for project management research and suggested that a strategy-as-practice perspective should be useful to study this challenge.

Within strategy-as-practice studies, consequentiality implies exploring practices that lead to strategic changes, without necessarily being deliberate or proposed by management (Jarzabkowski, Kavas & Krull, 2021). Actions can also have an indirect influence on change; a perspective that opens up for acknowledging the multiple actors and their actions on strategy practices (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006). Thus, grasping this multiplicity implies a need for research to follow strategic practices in inter-organisational projects.

Apart from the actions by the project actors, practices are influenced by codified rules in artefacts such as contracts and guidelines (Grabher & Ibert, 2011). Thus, it is not only the actions constituting a practice that are relevant to study, but also the artefacts that guide these actions. In outsourcing relationships, contracts play a particularly role, since they shape the boundaries between the involved actors and their actions, separating space, time, roles, and organisations (Bucher & Langley, 2016; Geiger, Danner-Schröder & Kremser, 2021). Through various forms of collaborative arrangements (van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022), actors can overcome such boundaries and jointly work to achieve change in and between organisations (Haniff & Galloway, 2022).

From a practice perspective, both actions of specific actors and work on strategic projects at different organisational levels can be followed (Friesl, Garreau & Heracleous, 2019). Strategizing is carried out by all organisational actors, but with more or less defined roles (Brorström & Willems, 2023; Splitter et al., 2023). In particular, managers acting between top management and operational actors, the middle managers, are claimed to be in a position to make things happen (Doz, 1996; Whittington, 2015). These managers translate strategic initiatives into operational action, as they both provide context and manage day-to-day work (Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2018). Whittington (2015) identifies managers doing this work in-between as strategists, even though they may not be the ones who have a 'Strategist' title. Such informal strategists often lack formal mandate in the forming and embedding of strategies, and the strategy practices that they draw upon can be deliberate or emergent (Whittington, 2006).

Developed in the same vein as strategy-as-practice perspective, projects over the last 15 years have been viewed and discussed with a project-as-practice approach. Blomquist and colleagues (2010) emphasize the need to follow and understand the dynamics of actors and their actions when carrying out projects. In a similar vein, Hällgren & Söderholm (2023) suggest that *"key objectives in a projects-as-practice study focused on microfoundations are to identify practices of people working in projects to describe and characterise their lived experience"* (p. 110). This zooming-in should be understood in its wider organisational and social context (Blomquist et al., 2010). It is not just about following the patterning of actions, but how these actions are embedded in a context (Buchan & Simpson, 2020; Engwall & Jerbrant, 2003), and also the influence between projects (Hedborg, Eriksson & Gustavsson, 2020).

2.2. Strategic projects in public organisations

Projects that are used to push change for a specific actor, organisation, or wider context can be seen as strategic projects (Balogun et al., 2016). However, a difficulty with using strategic projects to create lasting change is to embed the strategy in a dynamic social context (Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2007). For example, the project may need to navigate demands from both a parent organisation and potential parallel projects (van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022; Willems et al., 2020). In complex organising, such as large public organisations, managing actors must also handle multiple conflicting internal and external demands, often having difficulties reaching consensus (Dille & Söderlund, 2011; Qian, 2024). Furthermore, a strategic project must balance between serving the parent organisation and acting as a temporary organisation exploring strategic change (Artto, Kujala, Dietrich & Martinsuo, 2008).

Zooming-out for a contextual view, Locatelli et al. (2023) argue for the importance of projects for society to be able to meet grand challenges. It is well known that different organisations and sectors use projects to carry out such work to varying degrees (Bakker et al., 2016). While large projects are highly relevant for many public organisations to solve grand challenges, many public sector responsibilities relate to regular operations, for example, making sure that roads are ploughed, providing hospital care at all times, and delivering drinkable water. However, temporary organising is becoming more frequent also for such continuous work, partly due to the increasing outsourcing of public services, where contracts are limited in time by law (Fred, 2015), and partly to strategic change initiatives (see, for example, Allard-Poesi, 2015; Beste & Klakegg, 2022; Eikelenboom & van Marrewijk, 2024).

In addition, projects in political or public organisations are strongly bound to their institutional context, where project actors put significant effort into handling different institutional arrangements and demands of various actors (Dille & Söderlund, 2011; Matinheikki, Aaltonen & Walker, 2019). Different norms, time frames, and regulations can create tensions in the inter-organisational contexts (Söderlund & Sydow, 2019). This institutional embeddedness counteracts the understanding of projects as autonomous endeavours, having leeway to test new ideas and carry out tasks beyond the operational work (Lehtonen & Martinsuo, 2009). Qian (2024) identifies tensions in projects carried out by highly institutional organisations – such as public clients – between being flexible to handle uncertainty and being predictable by maintaining practices.

2.3. Bridging roles in strategic projects

A few studies on strategic projects, specifically, take on a practice perspective and elaborate on actors' practices in strategic projects

Table 1
Summary of studies on strategic projects with key insights into management and practice.

Publication	Empirical context	Theoretical background	Method	Key insights on management and practices	Potential for further research
Allard-Poesi (2015)	Strategic project at large social sector association	Sensemaking	Discourse analysis of conversation between a director and a management team	Opens up role of middle managers during strategic projects. Both middle- and top management contribute to the sensemaking of managerial roles in strategic projects.	Exploration of power and sensemaking in organisational strategy work, from a practice perspective.
van Marrewijk (2018)	Inter-organisational strategic change project in utility sector	Resistance literature	Longitudinal case study using interviews, documents, meetings and participant observations	Presents practices that enable and constrain change by showing how team members can be change agents whilst mid-managers can be resisters and how they interact.	Power and hierarchical relationships in inter-organisational strategic projects, with mid-manager as translator.
Löwstedt et al. (2018)	Strategy and governance at Swe. unit of multi-national construction company	Strategy-as-practice	Case study with three sub-studies using, respectively, interviews, observations and ethnography.	Highlights strategic focus in project mgmt literature. Show how project practices influence strategy. Identify overlapping practices and roles between parent org and project, and how project managers act in-between.	How project managers acquire competence and legitimacy as strategists.
Willems et al. (2020)	Inter-organisational innovation projects in railway and municipal city development.	Project isolation	Comparative case study, through observations and interviews	Identifies practices of isolation to show how project autonomy is dynamic and develops over time. Put forward how temporary and permanent organisations interact and shape each other.	Explore project isolation in less complex project contexts.
Beste and Klakegg (2022)	Strategic initiative at portfolio level of public construction projects	Cost performance	Action research through meetings with project managers at construction projects	Showcases that project team involvement in strategic initiative execution increases ownership and prohibits isolation of results. Illustrates importance of mapping strategic initiatives with to, e.g. PBOs.	How scope of strategic projects impact their management. Explore linkage of strategic projects objectives to organisational strategy.
Martinsuo and Ahola (2022)		Stakeholder and agency theory	Literature review	Uncovers challenges with multi-project management in inter-organisational contexts, specifically from a stakeholder perspective in multiple parent organisations.	Empirical research on multi-project management in inter-organisational contexts e.g. strategy, resources, governance and learning.
van Marrewijk and van den Ende (2022)	Inter-organisational strategic change project in telecom and utilities network	Order and conflict view, power relations	Ethnoventionist approach, through entography and interventions in inter-organisational change project	Illustrates importance of understanding power relations in inter-organisational strategic projects across multiple levels, from shop-floor workers to top management.	Critically reflect on power relations in strategic projects. Investigate the role of middle managers as mediators.
Eikelenboom and van Marrewijk (2024)	Strategic project at public organisation on transition to circular construction	Knowledge transfer and informal practices	Case study through interviews, documents, observations and reflective sessions	Exhibits how informal practices at parent org impacts knowledge sharing and adoption between projects. Stresses importance of including parent org top management as active participants in strategic projects to bridge boundaries and avoid conflicts.	How learnings from strategic projects are translated and embedded in parent org. Explore interactions between the parent org and the project.

(Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2018; Willems et al., 2020); however, research on the roles, and responsibilities, of specific actors is still scarce. Some exemptions have empirically explored how managing actors enable and resist strategic initiatives (van Marrewijk, 2018), middle managers' practices in a strategic project (Allard-Poesi, 2015) and how project managers can act in-between the project and the parent organisation (Löwstedt et al., 2018).

A literature search on 'strategic project' in leading project management journals (*International journal of project management, Project management journal, International journal of managing projects in business* and *Project leadership and society*), complemented by snowballing, illustrates emerging contributions to different perspectives on strategy-as-practice and suggest the potential to further explore the role between project and parent organisations, most often explored as middle managers. Following Löwstedt et al. (2018), middle managers are here defined as those managerial actors acting between top management and the supervisors involved in the day-to-day execution of the projects, thus being involved in both strategizing and the doing. Table 1 summarises recent and high-impact studies based on their attention to managing actors and their practices in strategic projects.

Based on the literature review, it may be concluded that the roles, with its responsibilities, in-between the project and parent organisation in organisational change are not well understood, even though studies show their important function in implementing strategic change (van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022) and bridging the organisational levels (Eikelenboom & van Marrewijk, 2024; Willems et al., 2020). Löwstedt et al. (2018) call for increased knowledge on how middle managers gain competence and legitimacy as strategists during a strategic project, possibly expanding their strategic responsibilities. Middle managers are suggested to connect the strategic project with the parent organisations (Martinsuo & Ahola, 2022), to counteract that project team actors feel dislocated from the distant strategic initiators at the top management level (van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022).

2.4. Research questions

From the conceptualisation of consequentiality by Jarzabkowski et al. (2021), it is possible to explore the strategic role of actors in-between the project and the parent organisation. The analysis presented here explores strategizing both in the project and in the parent organisation that initiates strategic change, in order to answer the following research questions:

How do roles and responsibilities in strategic projects evolve in response to shifting strategies in a public client organisation?

How do project actors navigate the multiplicity of goals when managing strategic projects in a public client organisation?

3. Methods

This section describes the research design, including case selection and justification, and our approach to material collection and analysis.

3.1. Research design and case description

The study is qualitative and follows a practice perspective (Giddens, 1984; Nicolini, 2012) to understand how actors have acted and why in this empirical setting (Feldman, 2015). Specifically, we have followed *'how things are done and by whom, emphasising the people doing strategy work (practitioners) in their daily activities (praxis), as well as the tools and methods (practices) they use'* (Mirabeau, Maguire & Hardy, 2018). A single case study approach has enabled analytical generalisability based on a deep understanding of the case setting (Ketokivi & Choi, 2014).

The public client, the Swedish Transport Administration (STA), is responsible for the operation and maintenance of all national roads in Sweden. The STA comprises a central level with a range of administrative, managerial, and technical functional units, and three functional departments that run investment projects of various sizes and maintenance contracts. See Fig. 1 for an overview and indication of which departments are involved in the strategic project. Most of the maintenance work is contracted to infrastructure contractors; for road maintenance, there are 108 such contracts based on geographical areas. For each area, the STA procures a contractor for maintenance work over a period of four years, with an option of 1–2 years prolongation.

Maintenance contract work is highly repetitive, based on a recurring annual cycle, but with high variations in needs depending on unpredictable events such as weather conditions and accidents. Contracts are often held by the same contractor for several contract iterations (Nilsson Vestola, Eriksson, Larsson & Karrbom Gustavsson, 2021). However, due to the difficulties of pre-predicting and specifying activities, contracts are incomplete and allow speculation that, in turn, impacts service quality, costs, safety, and relationships. As will be described in more detail below, the STA has in recent years been confronted with several internal and external demands related to its maintenance contracts (Swedish NAO, 2019). At the start of this study, they had tested collaborative contracting approaches in a few of their large-scale infrastructure projects (Rosander & Kadefors, 2023), and it was decided to launch a strategic change project with a similar focus also in two road maintenance contracts. Therefore, the strategic project logic was mixed with the logic of governing regular road maintenance work. One goal was to try new road maintenance work practices, not only for STA and its contractors, but also for the contractors' suppliers and subcontractors.

3.2. Material collection

Through the perspective of consequentiality (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021), we focused on actions taken by actors to understand managing of strategic initiatives. The empirical material was collected and analysed in several steps, continuously going back and forth between the literature and the empirical study. Initial interviews and document studies guided the literature search to include not just literature on strategic projects, but also on managerial roles, as respondents recurrently reflected on their roles and responsibilities in the strategic project. Material describing strategizing work performed by Strategists and Top managers involved in initiating and planning the project at a central level was over time complemented with the perspectives of the Managers of contract from STA and participants from the contractors, as they operationalised the strategic project in the frame of their assigned contracts. Therefore, we followed both how the strategic project was managed (Martinsuo et al., 2022) and how the roles and responsibilities of the involved actors developed based on what they did within the strategic project (Löwstedt et al., 2018; van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022).

The material collection includes semi-structured interviews, non-participatory meeting observations, and documents, where the different angles enabled triangulation (Gibbert, Ruigrok & Wicki, 2008). In total, we conducted 22 interviews with STA actors and the two contractors contracted for road maintenance that are part of the strategic project. The first round of interviews was carried out with the operational maintenance actors (both clients and contractors) when the contract period had just started. This round opened up the need to understand how the strategic project had come about, by whom, and for what reasons. Therefore, the second round of interviews included respondents from the central STA group that initiated and planned the strategic projects. This group included the Strategists, Managers from central units, and Procurers, as presented in Table 2.

The themes discussed during the interviews – partly developed from documents and pre-study interviews by the third author – were: development and perception of a collaborative contracting approach, examples of changed work methods or routines, learning and experience

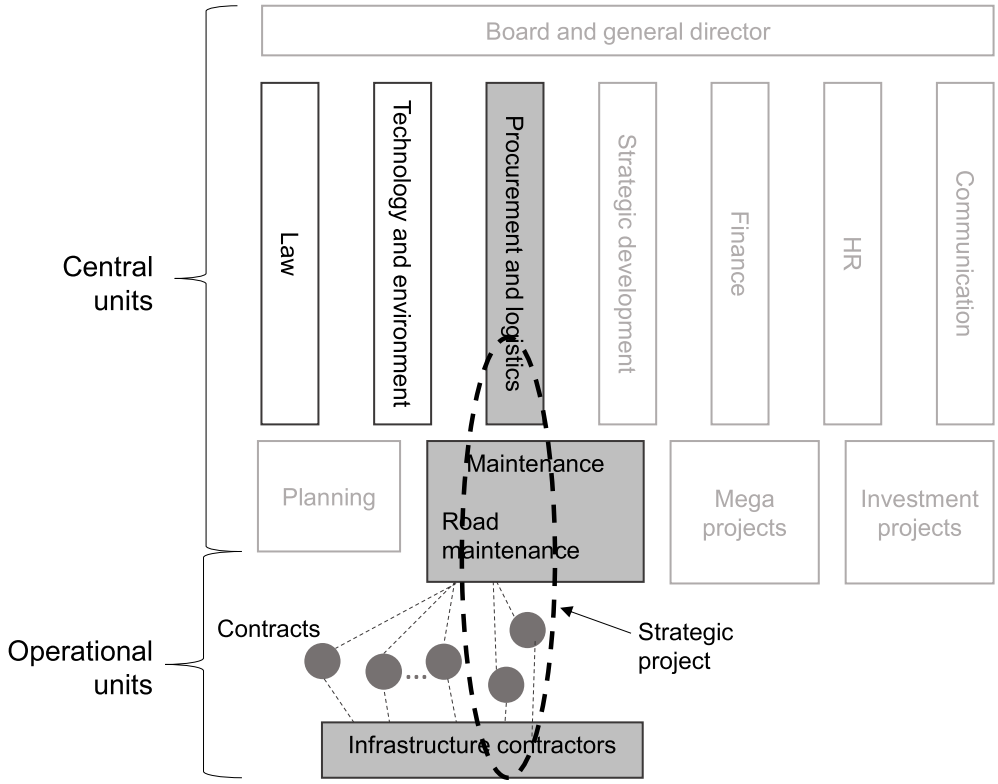

Fig. 1. Organisational chart of the STA, highlighting the departments involved in the strategic project. The dashed lines indicate contractual relationships between the STA and a contractor.

sharing, and relationships between internal and external actors. All interviews lasted about an hour and were recorded. One or two of the authors were present at all interviews and have transcribed them verbatim and shared them with the other authors for collaborative analysis (Kuckartz, 2014).

To gain a deeper understanding of how the STA maintenance actors and the contractors worked together in two contracts, meetings were observed during the first year of each contract, thus providing first-hand information about collaborative activities, including how the roles and responsibilities were carried out in meeting rooms (see details in Table 2). One of the authors was present at each meeting, took notes, and reported back to the other authors.

The documents, finally, provided both an initial understanding of the context and a detailed understanding of the changes in the contracts and other artefacts guiding the maintenance work. Documents were collected in parallel with other material, often during interviews when an interviewee referred to a document.

3.3. Analysis

The analysis was carried out in several steps, using Nvivo to organise all material, first inductively and then with the guidance of the literature overview on strategic projects and strategy-as-practice. Specifically, consequentiality has guided the latter part of the analysis, by exploring actors beyond those with formal strategic responsibility (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021), zooming in on the managerial actions in-between the STA central departments and the operationalisation of the strategic project thereby being able to follow how roles and responsibilities evolved. Thus, the study answers the calls for developing an increased understanding of the role of intermediary managers and middle managers in strategic projects (Allard-Poesi, 2015; Löwstedt et al., 2018; Beste & Klakegg, 2022; van Marrewijk, 2018).

Table 3 presents the data structure of the analysis, which followed suggestions for inductive reasoning by Gioia et al. (2013). All material was collected in Nvivo and coded inductively by the first author, and emerging themes were continuously discussed with the second author. The literature on strategic projects was used to elaborate on emerging themes and make sense of the STA's strategic initiative and how it was carried out in the two assigned contracts. In particular, recent articles from the project management literature (cf, Balogun et al., 2016; Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2018; Willems et al., 2020) inspired the construction of first-order themes.

The multiple levels and the different goals and directions visualised through the first order themes gave direction to continuing the literature review, focussing on strategic projects in inter-organisational contexts (cf., Haniff & Galloway, 2022; van Marrewijk, 2018). Iterating between the empirical material and the current discussions on strategic projects in the project management literature, the material was further organised in the second order themes. The iterative process and organising it into different themes helped enhance the internal validity, by theory triangulation, and creating a clear research framework (Gibbert et al., 2008). During the analysis, the authors also discussed the emerging findings with two senior researchers familiar with the STA and the strategic project, but not involved in the material collection, as a step to validate the findings. The ability to discuss the emerging findings within and outside the author team further enhanced internal validity.

After organising the material in the second-order themes, the consequentiality lens (Jarzabkowski et al., 2021) was applied as another type of actor – rather than those formally described by the STA as managing the strategic projects – appeared as doing strategy between the central departments and the contract level where the strategic project is carried out, namely the Managers of contract. For this, the meeting observations during the first year on maintenance production work were essential in following the Managers' of contract work during collaboration workshops, acting as a link between the multiple levels and the inter-organisational context. Furthermore, being able to trace the development of the strategic project allowed us to understand the change of strategies of the STA and the following planning and design of

Table 2
Empirical material for the case study.

Type of material	Description
Documents	
Power point presentation	Presentation material describing the strategic project and reason behind it
Process time line	Time line developed by STA describing the process of forming the strategic project
Organisation chart	Chart describing the actors from STA involved in forming the strategic project
Tendering documents	Specialized tendering documents constructed by the strategist and procurer at STA, for the potential contractors
Contractor agreement	Legal agreement between STA and the appointed contractor based on tendering process
Standard descriptions, regular contract	Document issued by STA to contractor describing how the included work should be carried out
Standard descriptions, collaborative contract	Updated standard description, constructed by STA and appointed contractor collaboratively
Interviews	
Parent organisation	
Strategist, STA (ST1)	STA strategist at maintenance department, co-leading of planning, and responsible for feedback, part of Central group
Strategist, STA (ST2)	STA strategist at procurement and logistics department, initiating and co-leading of planning, part of Central group
Strategist, STA (ST3)	STA strategist at procurement and logistics department, involved in the early planning
Strategist, STA (ST4)	STA strategist at maintenance department, assisted ST1 during planning and follow-up
Manager maintenance, STA (Mm1)	Manager at maintenance department responsible for regular contracts, partly involved in planning
Procurer contract 1, STA (Pc1)	Procurer at the procurement and logistics dep. responsible constructing new tendering and contract agreements
Procurer contract 2, STA (Pc2)	Procurer at the procurement and logistics dep. responsible constructing new tendering and contract agreements
Project organisation	
Contract 1	
Regional manager STA (RM-c1)	Manager for several maintenance areas, where contract 1 is located, legal part for STA side
Manager of contract STA (MC-c1)	Responsible for the maintenance area of contract 1, and main responsible for contractor relationship, part of Central group
Regional Coordinator STA (RC-c1)	Responsible for coordinating maintenance work across geographical areas, part of Central group
Contract leader, Contractor 1 (CL-c1)	Contractor's manager for regional area where contract 1 is located, legal part for contractor side
Production leader, Contractor 1 (PL-c1)	Responsible for maintenance work carried out within contract 1, appoints sub-contractors and suppliers
Ass. production leader Contractor 1 (aPL-c1)	Assist production leader, mainly in administrative work
Collaboration leader, Consultant (CL-c1)	Added role within the pilot project, to lead collaboration between STA and contractor
Contract 2	
Regional manager STA (RM-c2)	Manager for several maintenance areas, where contract 2 is located, legal part for STA side
Manager of contract STA (MC-c2)	Responsible for the maintenance area of contract 2, and main responsible for contractor relationship, part of Central group
Ass. manager STA (aMC-c2)	Assistant manager of contract, mainly administrative work.
Regional Coordinator STA (RC-c2)	Responsible for coordinating maintenance work across geographical areas, part of Central group
Area manager, Contractor 2 (AM, c2)	Contractor's manager for regional area where contract 2 is located, legal part for contractor side
Contract leader, Contractor 2 (CL-c2)	Responsible for maintenance work carried out within contract 2, appoints sub-contractors and suppliers
Production leader, Contractor 2 (PL-c2)	Responsible for the day-to-day work witihin contract 2, reports to Contract manager
Collaboration leader, Contractor 2 (CL-c2)	Added role within the pilot project, to lead collaboration between STA and contractor
Observations	
Strategic project presentation	STA Managers at maintenance department and project managers presenting the pilot project to research group
Collaboration workshop c1, 1	Two day workshop between STA and contractor 1, performing risk analysis and discussing their collaborative practices
Collaboration workshop c1, 2	Full day workshop between STA and contractor 1, discussing hinders and possibilities with new work practices
Collaboration workshop c2, 1	Full day workshop between STA and contractor 2, discussing hinders and possibilities with new work practices
Collaboration workshop c2, 2	Full day workshop between STA and contractor 2, discussing hinders and possibilities with new work practices
Experience feedback meeting, c1 & c2	Two day workshop with Strategists and managers at STA and contractors, sharing experiences with new ways of working

the strategic projects – identifying a strategic project increasingly isolated from the parent organisation. These aggregated findings will be elaborated on in detail.

4. Findings

The section presents how the strategic project was formed and unfolded over time and how the process led to increased isolation from the parent organisation. Based on this description, strategizing work taking place in-between the project and the parent organisation is presented.

4.1. Forming the strategic project

The STA is dependent on their inter-organisational relationships to gain knowledge of how to do road maintenance and what it costs. They have identified this as important for their development as clients and for improving road maintenance by better knowing what to procure. The strategic project was initiated against the backdrop of more general developments in procurement strategies and the client role of the STA. When the Swedish Transport Administration was formed in 2010, by a merger of the former Road and Rail Administrations and some smaller agencies, a *'pure client'* strategy was launched, which implies that the STA should have an arm-length relationship with its suppliers. However, around 2013, large contractors started to request less risky contracts for high-incertitude investment projects. These discussions took place in a national forum, where the STA and its main suppliers met and discussed the development of Swedish infrastructure. As a result, a task of developing a new procurement model for uncertain and complex investment projects was initiated. This strategy largely focused on collaborative, two-stage, open-book contracts, with inspiration from Early Contractor Involvement (ECI) models in other countries. Strategist 2 in the STA Procurement and logistics department was assigned the task to develop a new policy and guidelines for this collaborative contracting model, which was launched in 2016. From 2015–2018, seven of such contracts were procured for large investment projects. In parallel, the *'pure client'* ideal was successively replaced by an *'active client'* role, involving closer contact with contract partners.

However, the procurement of maintenance contracts is organised very differently from large investment projects, and the ECI strategy was not intended to be applied in maintenance contracts. Still, maintenance contracts had also been subjected to strong criticism from several different perspectives. Both an internal review (Swedish Transport Administration, 2016) and a national audit (Swedish NAO, 2019) had concluded that contracting for national road maintenance was inefficient and allowed negative speculation during bidding processes for unit price contracts procured on a lowest-price basis. For example, during

Table 3
Data structure of the analysis.

Codes	First order themes	Second order themes	Aggregated themes
Organisational strategy Developing process of strategic initiatives Goals Feedback	Descriptions of background and aim of strategic project Development from internal experience sharing	STA's development and change of strategies	Strategic project isolation
Contract requirements Procurement of contractors Developing collaborating processes Comparing contracts	Changed contract practices in the strategic project Project actors making sense of collaboration contracts	Planning and designing the strategic project	
Organising STA internally Client contractor relationship	Multi-level organising	Inter-organisational relationships	
Actors/roles Competences	Actors involved in strategic project and role descriptions		Emerging middle managers
Regular maintenance practices Changing practices/innovations	Changing work processes and products	Actions within the contracts spurred by the strategic project	
Trust Collaborating Group dynamics	Collaboration in contracts when carrying out strategic projects		

winter, contractors had been observed to plough snow and lay out salt and sand, even though it had not snowed significantly, just to improve profits. The STA wanted to move away from such *"speculated pricing, which makes contractors do activities based on what they will earn the most. Instead, it should be about what the roads need, do what is needed to be done, and pay for that"* (RM-c1). Such inefficiencies also negatively affected environmental sustainability.

Collaboration, then, was recognised as a means to facilitate joint planning and optimising activities based on specific needs: *"The purpose is to get good production and better results; we do not collaborate only to have pleasant coffee breaks together"* (ST3). As a consequence, the national infrastructure forum assigned STA the task of exploring collaborative procurement options to make road maintenance more attractive to contractors. This responsibility fell on Strategist 2, with his experiences from the ECI-models in the large projects, who invited strategists (Strategist 1 and 3) from the Maintenance department to explore options for collaborative contracts specifically for maintenance contracts. The details of this initial planning and design process are presented in Fig. 2. Between 2017–2019, a small group of strategists tried to convince top management in the Maintenance department to implement a general collaboration model. However, this failed, and the group instead suggested introducing a strategic project.

When it was decided to drive change through a strategic project, the initially loosely coupled group became a bit more formalised. The group was now labelled the 'central group' and had a steering group on top with the heads of departments (Procurement and logistics and Maintenance) with the mandate to make decisions. At this point, the focus was on developing procurement documents and getting the right people involved. Two procurers with experience in collaborative procurement, but not maintenance work, were chosen to form collaborative contracts in the strategic project. Moreover, the regional managers at the Maintenance department, who signed up to be part of the central group, as well as two Managers of contract from their respective regions, were included to help out with expertise on maintenance work. Several departments and divisions also supported the work of the central group when needed, "*with different competencies in Maintenance, Procurement and logistics, Law and technology, and Environment, in addition, we had a reference group with external actors, supporting the central group*" (ST1). These support actors were approached according to the need and previous relationships with key actors. Strategist 2 explains that *"we tried to find managers. Head of departments or divisions, with mandate, so that we could access different management teams. To not just have 'collaboration people'."* (ST2).

The central group suggested that the strategic project should include six contracts in parallel (one for each region in Sweden). However, only around 4–5 contracts are procured in each region every year, and it turned out to be difficult to find contracts that were suitable in terms of complexity, time, and geographical location, and had a sufficiently experienced Manager of contract. Furthermore, some Regional Managers and Managers of contract were reluctant to move away from regular contract processes and try a collaborative approach.

In the end, only two contracts were identified, and these were the

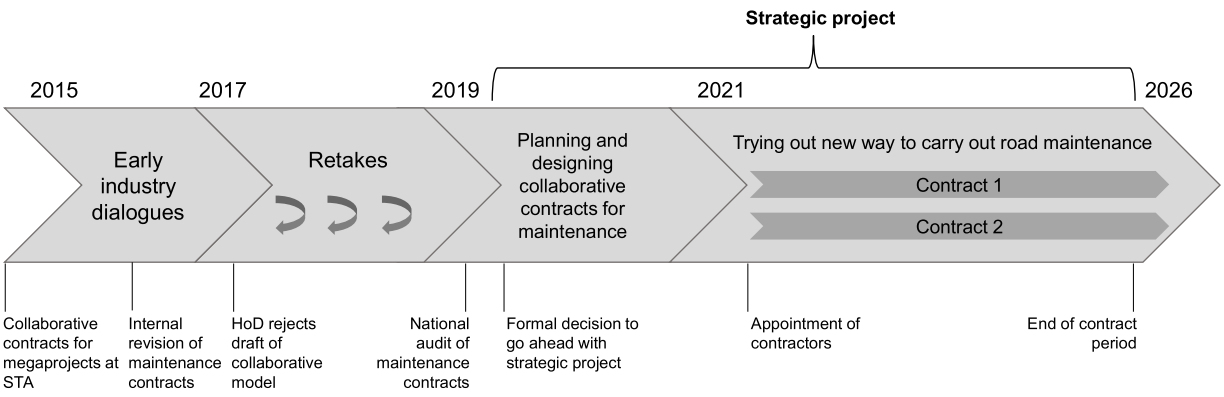

Fig. 2. Illustration of the process from initiating collaborative contracting to carrying out the strategic project.

contracts of the two Managers of contract that had been involved in the process of helping the Strategists to form the strategic project. As one of them explained: *"it came to a standstill. In the end, the contracts chosen were mine and the other manager's, who also worked with the early phases." (MC-c1)*

4.2. Increasing uncertainty and isolation

Initially, the two Managers of contract were invited to support the Strategists with their expertise in road maintenance during the designing of collaboration contracts. However, when it became difficult to recruit contracts for the strategic project, the Manager of contract role expanded to a central position. This isolated the strategic project and its two contracts from the remaining 106 road maintenance contracts, which received little information about the strategic project, during both planning and execution. Furthermore, from 2019 and onward the strategic project became increasingly embedded within the two contracts while the central group was dissolved, thus weakening the connections to the parent organisation.

Then in 2022, the central Maintenance department initiated another new collaboration strategy. During an Experience Sharing Workshop for the strategic project in February 2023, where everyone involved from STA and the two contractors met for two days, Strategist 1 presented a new framework for collaboration to be applied for all maintenance contracts. The new framework included a set of collaboration tools, where it would now be up to each Manager of contract, together with the appointed contractor and support functions, to decide on what collaborative tools they want to use in carrying out the maintenance work. However, in contrast to the model in focus in the strategic project, the new framework only included non-contractual measures. When commenting on the development process during a follow-up interview, Strategist 1 explained that *"it is not the strategic project we have looked at, but the regular contracts."* The reactions after the presentation were mixed. On the one hand, there was positive feedback on the continued active role of STA in changing maintenance practices. On the other hand, questions were raised about how the results of the strategic project would be cared for, how learning across contracts would be managed with more responsibility left to each contract, and how the central parts of STA and the contracts should interact. The Strategist who had led the strategic project had now increasingly moved on to new initiatives, leaving the Manager of contract as the only active role from STA in carrying out the strategic project.

As a result, none of the STA representatives interviewed believed that the Maintenance department would use the results of the strategic project on a large scale. However, the actors involved in the maintenance contracts hoped for a few additional test contracts, to share their experiences and improve the model. They were concerned that the experiences would be lost without follow-up: *"You never know, I might quit or someone at the contractor. It is already a risk, how to share the experience. I am the only one active from early planning to production."* (MC-c2).

From the contractor's perspective, they expressed a strong interest in collaborative contracts and expected a continuation, but became increasingly unsure about the future plans of the STA: *"I do not understand why they wait so long. Now they want to evaluate and reflect, the risk is that we will lose interest"* (CL-c1). A contract leader discussed the difficulty of setting internal strategies when your main client is shifting focus and sending mixed messages on the role of collaboration within road maintenance: *"What I hear through the grapevine is that a lot of senior STA and Managers of contract, those who set the tone, are not big supporters of collaborative approaches"* (CL-c1).

Several actors, both STA and contractors, came back to the long-term plan with this strategic project. The initiating Strategist, being a promoter of collaboration, thought that a longer perspective is needed than just one iteration of the contract: *"I think we should stop doing strategic projects, we need more long-term planning, to get the industry to realise that collaboration is an approach that STA will use… so that contractors can prepare."* (ST2)

4.3. Actors strategizing in-between project and parent organisations

A strategy-as-practice perspective reveals an actor, Manager of contract, without formal strategic responsibilities or mandate, yet holding an informal position bridging the central parts of the STA with the work within the contracts. While Strategist 1 and Strategist 2 formally managed the early phases of the strategic project, the two Managers of contract started off as advising on maintenance issues during the planning and design of the strategic project, but when the procurement was completed, their role expanded. As the strategic project was carried out through their contracts, the Managers of contract moved into a middle manager role. The isolation of the strategic project from the rest of the road maintenance contracts made the two Managers of contract important to bridge the strategic project with the rest of STA. Beyond their regular commitment to lead a road maintenance contract, their role became to communicate with contractors asking for long-term plans with the strategic initiative, collaborate with contractors to improve the work environment, reduce costs, and test innovations, among other initiatives part of the strategic project. Besides being the ones with the most knowledge of what was going on in the strategic project, they also had to communicate with the top managers at STA to explain and justify how the strategic project had changed the two contracts in both what road maintenance they carried out and the cost. Table 4 presents a summary of themes and quotes related to managing between the project and the parent organisations based on the themes presented in Table 3 in the Methods section.

In addition, it turned out that it was unclear how much freedom the contracts had to depart from the standard descriptions due to the failure to involve the department being the internal client who owns the description documents (called Road systems) more actively. Participants also felt that they would have needed more training and support upfront to be more effective in collaboration.

Another important aspect that affected the contract work was the general increase in costs due to inflation. The cost estimates performed in stage 1 of both contracts exceeded the initial budgets of the STA, and the estimates were also higher than the contract sums in comparable traditional fixed-price contracts. However, such comparisons are not reliable due to bid speculations in traditional contracts. Still, the steering group and higher-level managers took these highly hypothetical cost comparisons for facts and blamed the collaboration model for cost increases. Managers also felt that all the focus was now on costs:

Somewhere the focus has shifted from that it was important that we get these contracts going to a fear that they are costing too much. And then this other thing, that we were going to test this new model, has been forgotten" (RM-c2)

This landed on the contract:

This is not my idea; I was asked to manage this contract and my district said yes. (…) But it's not something I want to defend at every cost control meeting. 'How can it be so expensive?' We were supposed to test something new! (MC-c1)

The uncertainty also increased because the long-term plans were so unclear. There was some experience sharing with the Road systems department, to update them about the cost information the STA got from contractors in stage 1, but there was no clear planning for how to follow up the two contracts to build on their experiences. Reflecting on the forming process, a Strategist describes how *"one difficulty that we have discussed during the process is how follow-up of the work should be done"* (ST1). The Road systems department also seems to want more of this: *"We should get the strategic project to share more with us, for us to include in regular contracts"* (RC-c2).

From the beginning, there was even no planned experience exchange between the two contracts, but following an initiative by the Collaboration facilitator two joint workshops were organised during the first year of stage 2. Additionally, Strategist 1 has regular meetings with the

Table 4
Summary of themes and quotes related to management in-between, from the Manager of contract perspective.

Second order themes	Quotes related to management in-between the project and parent organisations
STA's development and change of strategies	"It is the STA that has taken a decision to carry out the project, that has initiated them, and now, when we are doing the financial forecast questions arise: 'wait, is this good business' and 'you thought 35 MSEK, why is it 46 MSEK? Should we continue this?'" (MC-c1) "the group was loosely put together. We do not have any contact with the group that designed the [collaboration contracts]. It is [MC-c1], me, [Strategist 1] and [Strategist 4] that have contact with each other…and from my understanding they report to [Strategist 2]." (MC-c2) "Now we have a new report meeting tomorrow to the steering group and I do not really know, it feels like they are not really on track. We have initiated phase 2 and by law there is nothing that can stop the coming four years." (MC-c1) "tomorrow is the last meeting with the steering group, then it will be phased out and a new steering group will be formed that will be the Maintenance client-group, and it is almost the same participants." (MC-c1) "This is not something I am running, it is an assignment that I got, to lead this contract given the circumstances. When we had fulfilled the conditions, I did not expect to sit in on decision meetings and defend the project" (MC-c1)
Planning and designing the strategic project	"A strategic project was created that [Strategist 1] was responsible for..then my boss pointed to me as voluntary" (MC-c1) Since so much need to be corrected and changed we had different working groups for different document..we had four five different groups. Me and [MC-c2] where in several." (MC-c1) "It have worked well the collaboration between contractor and client. As clients we have received swift response and we have prioritized together. Before we knew what we paid, but not what it costed, so we have of course learnt a lot" (MC-c2) "This is what the project is for, to increase the knowledge of the market and cost" (MC-c1) "We have talked about what could be better next time and to have a collaboration manager involved from start to take charge would have helped" (MC-c1) "(MC-c1) and I have been in contact after the experience workshop in Stockholm…We will have a meeting between the two contracts. It is unique that to contractors meet like this" (MC-c2)
Inter-organisational relationships	"At one point, I felt like STA was going for a professional client role or what they called it. Pure Client. At that time I felt we came further away from each other. I believe we need to be closer to each other, I think this is the way forward". (MC-c2). "We have developed a good collaboration. Everyone in the contract have been open. We have opened our financial system, and [contractor 1] have opened their" (MC-c1) "The resolution is bigger and the details are more…I get more detailed knowledge here, otherwise the work is rather similar" (MC-c2) "our communication stops with the Contract leader. We do not get further in the traditional contract, here it is different. I am part in meetings with the contractors on production issues" (MC-c2) "Road systems is scared that we will change the document with standards and work descriptions too much. We got the directive that we could do changed from our standards if we found better approaches, when collaborating with the contractor." (MC-c1) "the risk is now on me if the cost will expand. I need to keep money tight, I will not receive endless of money from Road system for the contract. But they are very nervous that I will come and ask for 5MSEK, and then another 5MSEK..so now it is me who have to argue about money and push the break. It cannot cost endlessly just because it is a collaboration contract" (MC-c1)
Actions within the contracts spurred by the strategic project	"We have been clear that we will not solves everything at start, rather we will try out how we report and how we work on site. It is an on-going process" (MC-c2) It was unfortunate that the collaboration manager had not started. But we started by ourselves instead, based on our ideas. it went well, our collaboration was good but it got formalized when the [Collaboration manager] came in" (MC-c1) "That we have built our own compensation model, it is unique in Sweden. No one else does it, so we will evaluate this" (MC-c2) "we were warned about a lot of administration in collaboration contracts, and that is the case. We have to handle huge amount of data" (MC-c2)

two contracts. *"We are still active, I have meetings with the two contract managers every two weeks, where they share their thoughts, where we try to help and draw experiences"* (ST1). But this experience sharing is limited to a group of four, the two Strategists from the Maintenance department and the two Managers of contract.

The leadership and responsibility for the strategic project is still unclear. When the contracts for stage 2 were signed, the steering group was dissolved. Strategist 2 is no longer involved, so Strategist 1 is the only active Strategist. Furthermore, a Manager of contract said that working in the strategic project contract was lonelier compared to working in regular contracts, as the regular support functions were less involved, since they did not have the necessary knowledge of collaborative work.

To summarise, halfway through the two maintenance contracts, there is a multiplicity of actors whose mandates and responsibilities are not clarified, and the responsibility for implementing collaborative approaches and for the strategic project has shifted over the years. Even though the contracts carrying out the strategic project are in 2024 still ongoing, the central units and functional departments have moved on to develop and test other approaches for collaboration in their inter-organisational contracts.

5. Discussion

The aim of this paper is to increase the understanding of practices for initiating and managing strategic projects in inter-organisational contexts. Drawing on recent literature in the field, the discussion will elaborate on strategic projects in public client organisations operationalised in inter-organisational contexts, how they become isolated between the operational level and the parent organisation, and how the roles and responsibilities of the project actors evolve in this process. These discussions shed light on how strategic projects are used both for transformation and legitimacy.

5.1. Isolation of strategic projects and new roles

As the strategies at the public client shifted, the strategic project was increasingly isolated in-between the contract level and the central parent organisation. Carrying out a strategic project in the context of a lengthy inter-organisational contract relationship resulted in the fact that most of the top managers and strategists became less and less involved as the contract progressed. Hence, while van Marrewijk (2017) found that project actors deliberately expanded their isolation from parent organisations, the current findings illustrate the opposite situation. Due to the lack of interest of top management and to the formal strategists' other undertakings, it became increasingly clear that the Managers of contract were responsible for making sure that road maintenance operations were carried out and, at the same time, for trying new ways to work with their contractors. As the high-level strategies shifted, the Managers of contract thus developed into a bridging actor – middle manager – acting strategically between the project and parent organisations (Allard-Poesi, 2015).

Thus, rather than having the Strategist and the central steering group follow it through, which has been emphasized by previous research as crucial to creating long-term change (Eikelenboom & van Marrewijk, 2024), the responsibility to advocate for the strategic project ended up at the contract level. As such, the study illustrates how the operational units become core actors in carrying out a strategic project and capturing experiences (cf. Brorström & Willems, 2023; Bryson et al., 2018; Whittington, 2019). Although Beste & Klakegg (2022) conclude that it is essential to involve the project team when implementing the change through project processes, this study shows the need for a balance in this respect. Leaning too heavily on the project team can cause the strategic project to end up in isolation, with little attention from the permanent organisation to its results.

Moreover, the findings show that the parent organisation is not 'one', but numerous actors with different wishes, which further increased the lack of direction on how and why the strategic project was carried out. Thus, the multiplicity of values associated with different actors does not just influence the early phases (Zerjav et al., 2021), but also whether and how the results can lead to long-term change. Although Haniff & Galloway (2022) found that collaborative contracts can help overcome differences, the multiplicity of internal actors within the public client led to reinforced boundaries. This is exemplified by the increased focus on costs during the embedding of the strategic project; those actors not familiar with collaborative contracting did not understand that the negotiated budgets were hypothetical and indicative rather than factual costs. This led to renewed headwinds facing the strategic project when it was already ongoing. For the Managers of contract, having to argue for the budget meant being stuck in-between several organisational goals (Löwstedt et al., 2018), trying to carry out the strategic project while maintaining contract operations without any additional budget.

5.2. Strategic projects in an inter-organisational context

As the strategic project was operationalised in an inter-organisational context, the shifting strategies leading to project isolation also affected the public client's contracted suppliers. When a public client decides to carry out a strategic project, this signals that a change is coming, which may affect roles, practices, and regulations in the whole industry (Söderlund & Sydow, 2019). In this case, contractors became uncertain about the impact of the strategic project on future road maintenance contracts, as the implementation process lacked detailed experience sharing and clear plans for further development of the strategy after the contract period. Thus, contractors did not know how to prepare for upcoming procurements: if they should invest in enhancing their collaborative skills or focus on developing their capabilities to manage traditional contracts. It was obvious that when the parent organisation moved on to focus on other initiatives, the contractor interpreted this shift as a lack of long-term interest in collaborative contracting by the public client. This again shows how a strategic project initiated by a public client is not an autonomous endeavour (Qian, 2024) and will indirectly affect inter-organisational actors (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Whittington, 2006).

This shows the importance of considering the longevity of a strategic project. While isolation can enable innovation within a project (Willems et al., 2020), changing practices in an inter-organisational network requires both time and that the various actors involved are steered in the same direction (Brorström & Norbäck, 2024; Rosenberg-Hansen et al., 2022). Therefore, public clients aiming at transformation must reflect on long-term plans for change, reaching beyond the scope of a strategic project. The findings clearly illustrate the difficulties involved when trying to carry out strategic change in an inter-organisational context through a project with a limited time frame. For example, it can be questioned to what extent contracts and practices relating to maintenance work can be changed through an exploratory approach covering a contract period of four years, especially if there is no clear plan for continuation.

5.3. Strategic projects for transformation or legitimacy?

For the public client in focus of this study, the strategic project was used to test collaborative contracting on a small scale, where top management chose a strategic project over implementing a model on a larger scale. The collaborative contracting initiative was communicated externally by the public client as an effort to visibly participate in changing road maintenance work - doing change together with the contractor (van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022). Framing it as a strategic project thus meant that the public client could uphold the regular practices of their maintenance work but still respond to those who asked for change.

When tracing the initiating and planning of the strategic project, it is clear that the public client's intention with the strategic project was not broad transformation into collaborative procurement in infrastructure maintenance contracts, but to learn about the costs and actual work of road maintenance and to visibly show that they took action from the negative feedback received internally and externally. In other words, from start the public client did not really care whether or not the strategic project was successful in carrying out change. This shows that strategic projects are not only initiated for transformation (Balogun et al., 2016; Martinsuo et al., 2022), but can also be used to build legitimacy.

To summarise, strategic projects are seen as a type of strategy practice (Jarzabkowski, 2005) and can be a way to test strategy on a small scale or to embed a strategy within an organisation. Carrying out or testing change through projects is, on the one hand, often easy to initiate and does not require extensive resources. However, if little or no results are embedded into public services, it cannot be considered an efficient strategy practice (Martinsuo et al., 2022; Vreugdenhil, Slinger, Thissen & Ker Rault, 2010).

6. Conclusions

Furthering the understanding on the use of strategic projects in inter-organisational contexts, the paper has discussed strategic projects in public client organisation and the need for project actors to take on new roles and responsibilities to manage in-between project and parent organisations, especially when the strategic project becomes isolated. A case study was used to investigate a strategic project that tested collaborative contracts in road maintenance procured by a public client. The study responds to the call by Martinsuo and colleagues for knowledge on how inter-organisational interdependencies and shifting management affect strategic projects.

Theoretical contributions are made to the understanding of the practice of strategic projects, specifically to the conversation in the project management literature on strategic projects in inter-

organisational contexts (DeFilippi & Sydow, 2016; van Marrewijk & van den Ende, 2022). The findings revealed a lack of structure regarding both participation and responsibilities, as well as uncertainties and ambiguities with respect to the goal of the strategic change. The study illustrates how shifting strategies of a public parent organisation creates a strategic project in isolation, with little possibility for project actors to communicate the results outside the project. This sheds light on the differences between the use of projects by public and private organisations for strategic change, where a public client is prone to continuously shift strategy to respond to political requirements and the inter-organisational actors to whom they have outsourced the doings of their public services. Thus, the study contributes with a discussion of the efficiency of strategizing through projects in public organisations, especially those operating in a network of suppliers through outsourcing. While it might be challenging to create long-term transformation from strategic projects in such a setting, the strategic projects can be efficient in creating legitimacy by their power to visualise and communicate that action is taken.

Furthermore, the isolation of the strategic project, where the project actors are left to manage in-between the project and the parent organisation, contrasts previous findings that project isolation can spur innovation (van Marrewijk, 2017; Willems et al., 2020). When isolation arises in response to shifting strategies of the parent organisation, the project actors focus not on innovation but on the need to defend the strategic project in relation to the parent organisation. The paper also illustrates how this creates an emerging middle manager from the project actors. Further, due to the isolation and increased responsibility of the middle managers, they cannot answer to the contractors' requests for a clear long-term strategic direction of the public client.

The study has practical implications for Strategists working with strategic projects, specifically by emphasising the need to anchor projects in the organisations and to ensure mandate for change already in the early planning. Top-management of public clients using strategic projects as a strategy practice are recommended to reflect carefully on how and when to use strategic projects to embed strategy or new ways of working in inter-organisational arrangements. The study shows how strategic practices moved from central units of the public client organisation to the contracts carrying out the strategic project. Therefore, embedding strategic change through a project becomes an issue for operational units, rather than for those with strategic responsibility. Moreover, when projects are used strategically to communicate action rather than drive transformation, it will be difficult for a sector to continuously change ways of working to adapt when a new strategy is initiated.

This study, while providing in-depth insights into strategic projects in inter-organisational contexts, is not without its limitations. The main limitation of the study is the limited time to follow the case, as it has captured the planning in retrospect and the first part of the execution of the strategic project as it happened. A longitudinal case study is proposed to investigate the possibilities for long-term effects of strategizing through projects at public organisations, as their context is continuously shifting depending on, e.g. shifting politics and environmental regulations.

The inter-organisational aspect was covered by interviewing actors from both sides of the contract, however, a limitation with the study lies in not including more actors in the sector, such as other contractors, suppliers, and sub-contractors. Therefore, to understand how public clients' strategizing affects the sector with which they work, further research should focus on how different actors adapt their practices to public clients' strategies.

The shifting logics between operational work and project work are discussed here as leading to project isolation. Relevant for project management research is to further investigate contradictive institutional logics when trying to carry out change through projects, as this can increase the understanding of when and how to use strategic projects. Further investigations could focus on mechanisms that help sustain strategic integration, such as adaptive governance structures.

The role of middle managers in this study has emerged as a key area for further exploration. Given their pivotal role in-between top management and operational work, research should investigate how middle managers navigate tensions between strategic changes and operational continuity. Additional research could explore the competencies, tools and support systems middle managers need to effectively manage these dual responsibilities.

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Susanna Hedborg: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Emilia Nilsson Vestola:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Anna Kadefors:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Resources, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Data curation.

Declaration of competing interest

None

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