CAN I GET SOME HELP DOWN HERE? INTER-PROJECT SUPPORT FOR CREATING SOCIAL VALUE THROUGH SOCIAL PROCUREMENT

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Employment requirements, as an aspect of social procurement, can be used as an innovative way for construction organizations to create internships for marginalized unemployed people, in the process creating social value. However, how to organize and collaborate to implement employment requirements in construction projects is unclear. Therefore, this paper investigates how practitioners working operatively in projects perceive the support from and relationship with their parent company and client when they have to implement and work with employment requirements on a daily basis. Semi-structured interviews with 23 practitioners working in three projects in Sweden were analysed using a theoretical framework of project management focused on resources and collaborative relationships. Findings show how resources and support is often lacking, and how relationships with parent companies and clients are tenuous. There is a lack of knowledge and clear goals from the parent company and client which create uncertainty. The operative actors in the projects have to deal with this uncertainty without formalized routines, standardized information sharing, or enough resources, so to cope they create their own tools and practices. The paper provides a bottom-up perspective on social procurement and illustrates concrete areas where parent companies and clients must rethink their (lack of) resources and support. For research the findings indicate what factors make collaboration regarding social procurement difficult and contributes novel insight into a scarcely researched phenomenon.

Keywords: employment, project management, social procurement, social value

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen mass migration, fiscal constraints, and increasing segregation, and as organizations are not immune to these societal challenges, they are trying to find new innovative ways to use their processes in order to build a sustainable common future (Barraket *et al.,* 2016). One such way is for organizations to use their purchasing power to achieve social goals and values that lie outside their normal procurement objectives (McCrudden 2004; Barraket *et al.,* 2016; Raiden *et al.,* 2019). This is called social procurement and it encompasses a wide range of aspects such as buying from local small and medium enterprises, buying from minority-owned or women-owned businesses, ensuring health and safety and fair working conditions, and employment of marginalized groups (cf. Zuo *et al.,* 2012; Loosemore 2016, Raiden *et*

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al., 2019). Sweden is especially battling problems of social exclusion and unemployment for people who are young, disabled, or newly immigrated, so social procurement has been focused on posing criteria called employment requirements (c.f. Lind and Mjörnell 2015). Employment requirements entail offering internships for people outside the labour market. Historically, the construction sector has been one of the main sectors where social procurement has been used, due to its close ties with communities and the spaces where we live. Therefore, the sector has been targeted as suitable for employment requirements (c.f. Lind and Mjörnell 2015).

However, despite that employment requirements have the potential to create social value for organizations and society, working with employment requirements is still novel in Sweden and there is no best practice, which is the case also for other geographical contexts. Organizations in the construction sector are experimenting with different methods to work with and implement employment requirements, but these methods need to be further developed (Petersen 2018). Moreover, social procurement is fairly unexamined conceptually, theoretically, and empirically both in research and in practice (Barraket *et al.,* 2016; Loosemore 2016; Raiden *et al.,* 2019).

Something which needs more insight is the relationship between the organizations who work together to implement employment requirements. When employment requirements are used three main types of organizations are involved: the client posing the requirements, the parent company (main contractor's head office) tendering for the contract, and the individual construction project fulfilling the contract. Of these three it is the individual construction projects and the operative workers therein who on a daily basis deal with the employment requirements and the interns employed through the requirements. How they organize this work and collaborate with their parent company and the client to implement employment requirements is unclear. This is important to investigate to ensure that the multi-party activity of employment requirements becomes effective and efficient to achieve the maximum social value possible, as today this have not been the case (c.f. Petersen 2018).

Therefore, this paper investigates how practitioners working on an operative level with construction or facilities maintenance in projects, who are those who in their daily work deal with both employment requirements and the interns employed through the requirements, perceive the support from and relationship with their parent company and client when employment requirements are implemented. The findings are analysed using a theoretical framework of project management focusing on resources and collaborative relationships. This will enable new theoretical and empirical insights into the complexity of working with employment requirements from a bottom-up perspective.

To implement social procurement and take in interns to work with construction or facilities maintenance means that multiple organizations must come together and collaborate, which has consequences for their practices and relationships. On the one hand previous research has found that social procurement has the potential to increase trust, collaboration, and knowledge sharing between project members (Erridge 2007; Barraket *et al.,* 2016; Troje and Gluch 2020), but on the other, when implementing social procurement trust and collaboration is instead often lacking in practice, which in turn hinders can diminish the social value output. Furthermore, social procurement is not seen as core business, support from governments is lacking, and social procurement is perceived to require more resources from projects (Erridge, 2007; Zuo *et al.,* 2012; Eadie and Rafferty 2014; Loosemore 2016; Murphy and Eadie 2019).

The organization of the construction sector is not always conductive for collaborating to implement social procurement. The construction sector is largely characterized by standardisation, efficiency in time, cost and scope, coordination difficulties, independent specialised work tasks, decentralisation of decision making, and independence (Dubois and Gadde 2002). This way of organizing creates complexity for actors who are tasked with implementing employment requirements and interns into the daily operations of their organizations.

As such, previous research on social procurement show how social procurement is perceived as requiring more resources, and that collaboration is important but difficult to achieve due to how the construction sector is organized. To understand this complexity better, adopting a project management perspective guided by the concepts of resources and collaborative relationships is helpful. Research on project management in construction and social sustainability in construction are nascent but scattered streams of literature (Goel *et al.,* 2020). By adopting a project management perspective when studying social procurement this theoretical gap can be bridged, and the support from and relationship between clients, parent companies, and projects can be better understood. This can in turn create a better base on which to build an effective, efficient, and social value maximizing practice for social procurement.

Project organizing can be described as organizations coming together to deliver a certain outcome (c.f. Winch 2014: 728) where the project owner brings financial resources and the project-based organization brings managerial and technical skills. A problem in research on projects is that the owner is often reduced to just a client who buys a service, and not a strategic actor (ibid), but the extent to which the client is involved in the project depends on its previous experience. Experienced clients will likely maintain a close presence as they have personnel that are used to working in coordinating roles between the client and project (Walker 2015).

There are several difficulties when working in projects in relation to lack of resources. For example, human resources are a major problem for project-based organizations, as they tend to stretch their human resources over several projects, leading to overload problems. It could also be that the project organization is bad at managing existing human resources (Winch 2014). In general, more attention needs to be paid to the social sustainability for workers in projects (Goel *et al.,* 2020). Project success is also dependent on the experience of key project members, rather than on specific technical or management skills. Context-specific aspects, like the organizational environment and its history, the previous experience of the parent organization, and the knowledge and experience of project members influence project success (Engwall 2003).

When it comes to collaborative relationships, working in projects also means to start all over again as project members are new for every new project. This can decrease motivation for individual workers, and efficiency is limited due to the lack of prior collaboration (c.f. Packendorff 2002). The episodic and decentralized nature of projects, as well as time and resource constraints diminish reflection, learning, and knowledge transfer between projects (Packendorff 2002; Winch 2014). Also, as the construction sector is decentralized, information is disseminated through different hierarchical levels and organizations, leading to inefficiently delivered and diluted information. To mitigate this issue information should be standardized and aligned across organizations. However, this can be difficult as organizations in the sector have diverse practices and arms' length relationships, making shared information systems scarce (Fulford and Standing 2014). Also, it is not uncommon for objectives

to differ between the client, contractor, project organization, and work teams. Aligning these objectives is an important part of project management (Walker 2015).

There are different ways in which actors can deal with these resource and collaborative constraints and how this impacts the dissemination of new practices, like working with employment requirements. Bresnen *et al.,* (2004) found that actors who promote new working practices in projects attempt to make them standardized, while project actors who are affected by new practices instead try to reconstruct and negotiate their meaning when deciding which aspects of the new practices they wanted to adapt, adopt, or reject. This decision is however dependent on the resources available in the project. Structural factors like already embedded practices, distributed work practices, decentralization, and short-term task performance that trump long-term learning further impact on the dissemination of new practices in projects.

Previous research and the theoretical framework show the importance of resources and collaborative relationships, and how these are interconnected. Collaborative relationships can provide resources, and the way collaborative relationships are managed depends on the level of resources at hand. Both are important for projects success and the embedding of new practices. These two themes therefore guide the analysis of the empirical data: (1) Resources to work with employment requirements, and (2) Collaborative relationships between the project, parent company, and client.

METHOD

To investigate how practitioners perceive the support from and relationship with their parent company and client when employment requirements are implemented, a qualitative research approach was used. Qualitative research is useful when studying social relations and to capture actions and perceptions and the intricacies of daily life (Silverman 2013). This study includes three different projects where employment requirements were implemented. The first project is a private housing company building new apartments, the second project is a municipality building a new pre-school, and the third project is a corporate group of public housing companies who pose employment requirements on the facilities management departments of their subsidiary companies. These cases were chosen as they had advertised a prominent social procurement profile, making them important to study to see if the work with employment requirements unfolded planned and advertised.

Using a semi-structured approach which allowed for interview flexibility (Kvale 2007), 23 practitioners working in projects were interviewed (see Table 1). The interviewees from the first and second project worked with production on site or closely with implementing employment requirements from the parent company or client. Interviewees from the third project worked with facilities maintenance in different subsidiary housing companies. The majority of the interviewees worked as supervisors for the interns in addition to their formal work role. As such, the interviewees from all projects worked with implementing employment requirements and interns on a daily basis. In each project interns were also interviewed.

The interviews lasted around one hour and were conducted between Dec 2018-May 2019, and focused on topics such as the interviewees' experiences of organizing their daily work with employment requirements and the interns, their resources for doing so, their relationships and collaboration with other actors outside the project, and their overall positive and negative perceptions of working with employment requirements.

To enable a systematic overview of the data it was transcribed verbatim and analysed in the software program NVivo.

Table 1 Information on interviewees

Project	Client	Example of roles	Interviewee codes
1: Apartments	Private	Area manager, project manager, site manager, intern	A1-7
2: Pre-school	Public	Area manager, project manager, site manager, work leader, intern, public procurement officer	PS1-6
3: Facilities Maintenance	Internal (public)	Housing officer working with facilities maintenance of buildings, intern	FM1-10

To allow for unexpected themes to emerge, the data was first inductively and thematically coded (Braun and Clarke 2006). All codes were recorded in order to refine the coding structure, so it reflected the data as accurately as possible. The codes were then organized and analysed according to the two themes identified in the literature on social procurement and project management: (1) Resources to work with employment requirements, and (2) Collaborative relationships between the project, parent company, and client.

FINDINGS

In general, the interviewees describe their new working tasks related to the implementation of employment requirements and taking in interns as difficult to do due to resource restraints and lack of practical and tangible support from the parent company and client. Many interviewees, especially those who work as supervisors of the interns, feel as though they have to solve problems on their own and on an ad hoc basis, and that they were unprepared for their new responsibilities as supervisors. For example, despite having supervisory responsibilities added to their role, some interviewees got no training at all on how to handle these new responsibilities. Instead the projects relied on the previous work experience of the supervisors.

In addition to not being fully trained for their new responsibilities, the interviewees had few forums to discuss their experiences with other supervisors in other projects or subsidiary companies. Many wished that their parent company or client had provided an arena for them to exchange knowledge: "We need to sit down in peace and quiet and talk about what we think and find some best practices. But [the parent company] have not enabled that, unfortunately" (FM4). There had been opportunities for intern supervisors to meet, but these were often described as being few and far between, and that turnout was often poor, for example due to the time where the meetings were scheduled: "In the last supervisors' meeting it was only two who turned up, and then it is difficult to know what is happening in [the organization]" (FM3).

The interviewees described how resources to prepare for the interns had not been provided. For example, the interviewees expressed a wish to meet the interns before they started to prepare both themselves and the interns for the upcoming internships: "I would like to see them when they are in school, so we get to put a face to them, and they get to put a face to us. They would already have an idea what they are going to work with" (FM4). After the internships ended the problem was a lack of follow up of individual interns: "We work very closely together, the intern is with me all the time, so I think it would be interesting to [know what happens to them afterwards]. To know that this leads somewhere" (FM3). The resources for enabling a continuity for supervisors in relation to their interns was therefore low.

A lack of resources was an often-recurring topic in the interviews, and interviewees representing clients explained the lack of resources and low presence in the project as a result of their lack of knowledge of social procurement. One client representative (A5) said: "Employment requirements are new for us, so it is difficult to know what resources are enough". The clients were often aware of their shortcomings and tried to make amendments: "We have chosen to have low requirements, because we don't know if we can live up to them. If we don't have the internal structure the requirements can become too steep, and I know [the contractor] felt like they didn't get enough support from the municipality" (PS6). This view is shared by the interviewees: "It doesn't feel like we've gotten very good support [from the parent company], but they haven't really had the knowledge" (PS4).

Many of the interviewees highlighted a lack of time and knowledge as large resource restraints for working with employment requirements and the interns, and this was further aggravated by a lack of formalized practices. This led to frustration, and the interviewees felt like it negatively impacted on the quality of the internships: "It is our lack of time that constrains how many we can take in, and we also have to get along with our client. Sometimes it feels like we are placating the municipality to have a better chance of getting land allocations, but we want to get away from that and instead emphasize the individual and the good we do for the country" (A2).

To overcome the lack of resources and support from the parent company and client some interviewees have taken an initiative to create tools for the internships that they felt were lacking. For example, one interviewee explained how he created a feedback form to see what he as a supervisor could improve for the next round of interns, and another interviewee had recorded informational film clips about different work tasks: "We have made introductory film clips for [the interns], like what safety gear to wear when you are using a hand mower or a hedge trimmer or a leaf blower and other machines. So, they can watch those before they perform these tasks" (FM2). The interviewees describe how they frequently had to engage in work tasks far beyond their formal work responsibilities, like helping the interns read private emails, answer calls from welfare services, showing them how to pay bills, etc. The reason for these tasks was to make the interns' private lives function, because if their private lives did not work the internships were said to be negatively affected.

The (lack of) resources allotted to the projects is mirrored in the relationship with the parent company and client, where the interviewees from the project organizations described how they felt detached and isolated from the rest of the project environment. Relationships with the parent company and client is described as tenuous and opaque: "I can't say anything about the client, it doesn't feel like they have a specific person involved [in the project], at least I've never met anyone" (PS4).

Many of the interviewees, especially from the client and parent company, claim that they want to shape the work with employment requirements together, and that this is a reason for why practices are informal. For example, one client representative (A7) admitted that: "Early on we did not really know what we wanted, instead we just said that this is something which we have to shape together along the way, to discuss what is possible or not, in dialogue with the contractor". However, the interviewees in the project organization mainly saw a lack of participation in the project from the parent company and client, rather than an opportunity for co-creation. "There has been a lot of engagement, but in the beginning, there was also a lot of frustration that we didn't know how to practically go about it. And the client also didn't know and have instead

found some text that they've just 'copy pasted', thinking they're doing a good job. But they're not seeing the consequences of the requirements they pose" (PS1). Some interviewees described that they felt like the client added employment requirements to the contract last minute, leaving the project to handle the aftermath: "There is not a real plan for the project, it's more of an initial requirement from the client" (PS2).

Despite the co-creation the client wished to do with the project, few of the interviewees feel like they could affect the current "model" for implementing employment requirements, and that the model was just delivered in a top-down manner: "Everything just came from above, and then it is delegated down, finally reaching me, the facilities manager. That's just how it is […] and I don't have anybody further down to delegate to, so I have to deal with it" (FM7). The interviewees describe how they feel detached from top management, and one interviewee who was on the board of the parent company described his attempt as influencing the model as: "Not a lot is happening, and finally you reach a point where you cannot nag anymore, it become uncomfortable, and you can't get any further. You become annoying" (FM4). This is problematic as it could potentially diminish commitment in the projects: "If this is supposed to be a long-term commitment maybe it should be better anchored in the whole organization, so you actually know what is going on and what the results from our efforts are" (FM3).

Much like the relationship with parent companies and clients are perceived to be weak, so is the degree of information sharing and knowledge transfer: "We must have a shared view in the project, with our client, so you speak the same language and want the same things. The important thing is communication and having a common goal" (A2). However, despite that information sharing and knowledge transfer was deemed important by the interviewees, in practice it was often uneven, informal, and not yet routinized: "We have some knowledge transfer, because after each project we make a little report about what we have achieved, with good and bad experiences. We have a person at the parent company who coordinates this, but it is not a self-playing piano" (A2). The informality of information sharing was said to be problematic as it diminished the legitimacy of employment requirements.

DISCUSSION

Previous research emphasize how project success is very dependent on the experience of key project members and clients (Engwall 2003; Walker 2015). Experience can be an important resource, and in this study, it is clear that the lack of experience among both parent companies and clients negatively affect projects' abilities to implement employment requirements. A lack of knowledge and experience also comes into play considering the lack of training for the interviewees working as supervisors of the interns. If training for supervisors would had been standardized this could have provided the projects with better prerequisites to implement employment requirements and integrate the interns in a more effective and efficient manner. Instead, resources related to the management of human resources were a general problem, for example in terms of supervisors not receiving the training or time to fully take on their supervisory role, as well as supervisors often being overexerted and stressed in their working life (c.f. Winch 2014). This is in line with Goel's *et al.,* notion that social sustainability of workers in projects must be more acknowledged.

Previous research suggests that the tabula rasa of each new project could decrease motivation (Packendorff 2002). In this study that was not something which was highlighted by the interviewees; instead the one demotivating factor was said to be the

lack of resources that led to supervisors not knowing what happened to individual interns after the internships ended. Because the sector is reliant on project organizations to implement employment requirements, a lack of motivation amongst operative actors working in the project could be very detrimental to a wider dissemination of employment requirements practices.

One way of overcoming the lack of resources was how the interviewees created tools and practices to facilitate the work with employment requirements and the interns. For example, they went beyond their formal work tasks to help the interns with private matters or make instructional film clips or feedback surveys. In a similar vein, Bresnen *et al.,* (2004) explained how project actors who are affected by new practices, like employment requirements, try to reconstruct and negotiate their meaning. The "above-and-beyond" type of work the interviewees engage in could be an example of them trying to reconstruct their practices in order to accommodate employment requirements, as their parent company and client have not been able to do that for them. However, it is unclear how much reconstruction and above-and-beyond work the project workers can really engage in, considering their lack of resources.

Winch (2014) claim that research often portrays clients as non-strategic actors, and in this study, this seems to be true also in practice. The findings show how clients did not always have a clear plan when posing employment requirements, that they lack knowledge on what resources they need to provide to projects, and that they are detached from the project. In this sense they contribute only financial resources without much managerial skills (at least in terms of implementing employment requirements). Involvement was found to be scarce in all three projects, likely due to their self-confessed lack of knowledge (c.f. Walker 2015).

The lack of knowledge led to an informality of information sharing and knowledge transfer, which in turn created uncertainty for project organizations. Furthermore, potential knowledge which could decrease uncertainty is lost due to good experiences not being formally documented. Looking to previous research, and found in this study, this is then likely also related to the time and resource constraints, which in turn can diminish learning and knowledge transfer between projects (Packendorff 2002; Winch 2014). However, despite that previous research suggests that information needs to be standardized and aligned across organizations (Fulford and Standing 2014), this has not yet been established in the case of employment requirements.

Although it is common for objectives to differ between clients, contractors, and project organizations, aligning objectives is an important part of project management (Walker 2015). The interviewees from this study expressed similar views. However, in the case of employment requirements it does not seem to be a divergence of goals that are necessarily creating problems, but rather that the goals of the client and parent company are unclear. Because clients are unsure of how they want to work with employment requirements, their presence in the projects is scarce, and that in some cases the requirements are a last-minute addition to the contracts, this creates uncertainty that the projects are left to deal with on their own.

Lastly, one major reason for why the interviewees perceive that they do not get enough support from their parent company and client is likely due to the traditional organization of the construction sector. Structural factors like coordination difficulties. weak long-term learning, and decentralisation of decision making (Dubois and Gadde 2002) could explain the detachment the interviewees describe. The detachment between clients, parent companies and projects may ultimately

undermine opportunities for organizations to co-create social value, where social value is instead created only from the bottom with the efforts of the operative actors. This is a missed opportunity for the construction sector. If project members work in isolation, and if the work of the projects is unacknowledged by parent companies and clients, this will surely impact negatively on the motivation of the actors who work daily to implement employment requirements. This could in turn decrease the dissemination of employment requirement practices, and by extension diminish social value for interns.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate how practitioners working operatively in individual construction projects perceive the support from and relationship with their parent company and client when implementing employment requirements as a part of social procurement. Findings show how resources and support is lacking, and relationships are often tenuous. Firstly, there is a lack of knowledge and clear goals from the client and parent company which creates uncertainty for the projects. Secondly, the projects have to deal with this uncertainty without formalized routines, standardized knowledge transfer and information sharing, or enough resources. To cope they create their own tools and practices to make their and their interns' work life function.

For theory the findings show that it is not divergent goals among project parties that creates complexity (Walker, 2015), but rather that goals were unclear. Previous research (Erridge 2007; Barraket *et al.,* 2016; Troje and Gluch 2020) have found that social procurement can lead to deeper collaboration between different actors and organizations, but that it is difficult in practice. This study corroborates this but adds insight to why it is difficult, and highlight lack of formalized and standardized routines, informal knowledge transfer and information sharing, and a lack of experience among parent companies and clients as especially detrimental factors. Goel *et al.,* (2020) suggests that future research should investigate current levels of social considerations in procurement processes and identify leadership roles and competencies needed to implement social sustainability in construction projects. The findings do not answer these questions specifically, however, it takes a first step to identify some areas where these aspects are lacking.

For practice the findings illustrate concrete areas where clients and parent companies must rethink their (lack of) resources and support. The study shows how operative workers in the projects becomes demotivated by the lack of follow-up of individual interns, lack of acknowledgment in the parent organization, and inability to affect the "model" for implementing employment requirements. Social procurement, if applied properly, can help build a common good in construction. However, without proper support, resources, and knowledge, social procurement will likely be implemented less effectively and efficiently, and maximum social value might be diminished.

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