Appendix C: Summary

Introduction

Infrastructure projects in the Netherlands, such as the construction of roads, bridges and tunnels, have become larger and more complex in recent years. These projects often have a large societal impact, a long duration and high societal costs, which can easily run into tens or hundreds of millions of euros. The Schiphol-Amsterdam-Almere (SAA) infrastructure program of Rijkswaterstaat, which is the focus of this study, is among the largest of such projects: its planned total construction is more than 10 years and the total financial volume is around 4.5 billion euros. At the same time, with the rise of neoliberal thinking (*New Public Management*) in the last decades of the 20th century, the mode of cooperation between the commissioning authority and contractors in the infrastructure sector in the Netherlands has changed. Since then, under pressure from politics and the private sector, more tasks and responsibilities have shifted from the public sector to the private sector, and the large public contracting authorities such as Rijkswaterstaat have increasingly distanced themselves from the actual projects. The relationship between the commissioning authority and the contractor became more and more contract-driven, and the respective contractual responsibilities have become more strictly separated.

Recent studies have shown that the course of infrastructure projects, and everything that happens around them, is never fully predictable, and that a good contract does not automatically guarantee a good project. There is a risk that the separation of responsibilities in the contract will lead to parties gradually losing contact with each other. In the new *Market Strategy*, developed jointly by Rijkswaterstaat, other public contracting authorities and parties from the private sector, a shift can therefore be seen, from separate responsibilities to a focus on a joint task for the commissioning authority and contractor, in which these parties make better use of each other’s expertise (*‘Bouwen doe je samen’* [Building together]). In this strategy both parties, the commissioning authority and contractor, focus on the underlying societal aspects of the project as a mutual task.

This idea has been implemented within the infrastructure program SAA under the name *Resilient Partnership*. Achieving such a partnership requires a shift at the commissioning authority from a controlling role to a more facilitating role with respect to the contractor; for the contractor this requires an ability to empathize with the societal and political responsibility of the commissioning
authority. In this way, ‘being of service to the project’ means that both parties are aware of and consider each other’s roles and interests so that everyone’s expertise serves the realization of the project to the maximum extent possible.

**The research question**

I have formulated my main research question as follows:

**How do public and private actors give meaning to the concept of Resilient Partnership within the Dutch infrastructure domain?**

In the present study I took an interpretative research approach based on the assumption that phenomena in the social domain, such as modes of cooperation between people and organizations, are social constructs and not natural phenomena. According to this approach, these constructs can best be investigated by focusing on processes of sensemaking – interpretation – by people; hence the term interpretative research. This qualitative research method is fundamentally different from the more common quantitative method, which focuses on aspects such as quantitative data collection and objective measurability.

The object of my research was the program organization SAA with its cooperating partners, such as the various contractors on the project. The organization is responsible for the realization of the SAA infrastructure program, which aims to improve the accessibility and quality of life in the northern part of the Randstad (the urban conglomeration in the western region of the Netherlands.) To achieve this aim, about 63 km of the national road network is being widened between Schiphol, Amsterdam and Almere, and various landscape integration measures are being implemented. I searched for narratives about cooperation with these partners and about the corresponding dilemmas and tensions. My research centered on the conversations, i.e. the narratives on the work floor, and the changes in these narratives over time. By taking an interpretive approach, I endeavored to create a picture of the mode of cooperation in a large infrastructure program such as SAA, and gave meaning to these findings. Subsequently, I investigated how changes in that mode of cooperation could be brought about through narratives.
Theoretical background

Resilient partnering: building trust and adaptive capacity together

Since the 1990s, a shift has been observed in the scientific debates about projects and project management towards a more holistic view of project management and the associated success factors. Until that time, research into projects was conducted primarily in an instrumental and practice-oriented fashion, and was largely normative and prescriptive, with a focus on what should happen to improve project management. But after the 1990s, researchers began to focus increasingly on what actually happened in projects. This new scientific approach, introduced under the term Practice Turn, emphasized action and interaction between people and organizations, and studied what people do and say regarding specific events.

In this approach, project organizations are seen as complex social environments in which all participants have their own norms, values and interests, and can respond in different ways to a specific situation or context. In literature since the turn of the century, we therefore see a shift from a functional to a more substantive approach, with more attention for the ‘soft’ side of project management, based on the idea that context is not predictable and that management which is based only on hard elements does not guarantee project success. In the approach to projects as technical instruments, the emphasis is on the delineation of the work and a rigid system-oriented tactic with clearly defined tasks for all project staff. In contrast, the social construct approach assumes a changing context, and the emphasis is much more on the necessity of human interaction to arrive at acceptable project results.

In the area of cooperation, which is a crucial success factor for projects and project management, a shift can also be seen in literature from the functional and contract-driven approach to the substantial and cooperative approach. For the latter approach, the term partnering is also used in literature. The contract-based approach to partnering, with aspects such as contract-based incentives and bonus/malus arrangements, will not by definition lead to positive project results. After all, contracts between project partners will never be able to cover every contingency. Certain aspects of contracts are subject to multiple interpretations and/or are contradictory. As a result, in conflict situations they will be explained differently based on differing interests. The way in which parties do this collectively can greatly influence the result of the project. This makes trust between parties an important factor in partnering. Trust is not something that
can be contractually ‘arranged’ in advance. It comes about through experience, and parties have to build mutual trust as they work together. When building trust, it is good to understand that that the interests of the parties can be divergent and potentially conflicting. During partnering it is therefore important for the parties to be able to transcend their own interests to benefit the mutual interest that focuses on achieving the joint project result. Despite the expectation that both parties can achieve the greatest benefit when they cooperate, it can be a problem if neither party wants to put itself in a vulnerable position by being the first to seek cooperation without the guarantee that the other party will do that as well. This leads to a continuous threat of keeping their individual options open, or falling back on these options.

Based on the above, in the present study partnering is seen as a dynamic and iterative process in which the actual implementation of partnering will be determined by the collective experiences acquired during the course of the project. Based on this reasoning, no blueprint can be provided for successful partnering, and a successful approach in one project will not necessarily lead to the same success in another project. It is not a ‘trick’ that can be easily copied.

Focusing on the relationship between the commissioning authority and the contractor in large infrastructure projects, during the process of partnering it is important for these parties to jointly seek a balance between the contract-driven approach and the more relationship-oriented approach in which both parties develop the capacity to reflect and learn to deal more effectively with unexpected events. Besides mutual trust, adaptive capacity is also a key concept. For adaptive capacity, I have used the term resilience, with the corresponding metaphor of a shock-absorbing cushion that must be filled in order to withstand unexpected situations or setbacks, which indeed will occur in every complex project. To fill this cushion, mutual trust is essential. A mutually reinforcing process then emerges: trust enhances resilience, which in turn enhances trust, and so on. If the cushion is sufficiently filled, the parties can ‘withstand a shock’ if something happens. With increasing resilience, the capacity to solve problems in the cooperative relationship also increases in order to find a good balance between contract-based management and cooperation.

The interaction between sensemaking and sensegiving

To achieve the aforementioned partnering, the assumption in this study is that the cooperative culture of the parties involved is focused on the development of resilience and trust. This is often not automatic, and changing the
culture of cooperation is usually a long and complex process. In this process it is important to look at what is actually happening on the work floor, which narratives have been created there, the normative force that emerges from these narratives through sensegiving and how both parties change their cooperative behavior and reflect on this process. This practice is dynamic, it is influenced by the context and it is continually subject to change. It can be stated that these narratives are the carriers of culture within an organization, and that new narratives lead to a change in the sensegiving of the employees in the organization and consequently to a change in the culture of the organization. This narrative approach is fundamentally different from the more classical approach to programs for culture interventions, which are often designed as large technocratic projects, mainly deployed top-down from management while taking little account of actual processes on the work floor.

Culture change can also be described as an interaction between sensegiving and sensemaking. In this process, sensemaking concerns how employees experience and understand their day-to-day activities, and how they discuss this with each other, while sensegiving concerns how the management of an organization attempts to influence the process of sensemaking towards the cultural change that they desire. Management-directed sensegiving in an organization focuses on and enlarges upon new experiences or narratives on the work floor to replace the old narratives. Employees respond to this with sensemaking, which in turn leads to sensemaking for management and to ‘adapted’ sensegiving, based on the new practices. This creates a process of interaction between sensegiving and sensemaking that involves the entire organization, management and employees alike. In this way, the narratives can be used by employees as a means to clarify the situation for themselves (sensemaking) and at the same time as a means of influencing the understanding of others (sensegiving) and thus as an outcome of collective construction of meaning. New narratives can in this way lead to a new culture of cooperation between the commissioning authority and contractor and can create and enhance a new mode of partnering: resilient partnering. During this process, the narratives serve essentially as a source of inspiration for sensemaking, which then fuels sensegiving. The narratives thus become the air that is used to fill the aforementioned shock-absorbing cushion.

The narratives from practice

To obtain a broad and diverse picture of events and processes within the SAA program and within the cooperative relationships with other parties, narra-
tives have been ‘gathered’ from all parts of the SAA organization and from the contracting parties. This was done at the management level, on the work floor and at all levels in between. This made it possible to illuminate the same event from various perspectives, which in turn enriched the corresponding narratives. The study itself lasted approximately three years, from 2015 through 2017. As a result, a clear picture was acquired of the developments among employees at both Rijkswaterstaat and in the private sector regarding their thinking about and dealing with the above-mentioned topics, such as resilience, trust, contract-based management and reflection.

Narratives were collected in various ways, such as observations, interviews, interactive workshops with employees of the commissioning authority or jointly with employees of the contractor, and during the twice-yearly organization-wide employee meetings of the SAA program. During the initial phase of the process, in my role as director and initiator of the change process I took a steering role while recording the first narratives. Indeed, because I held the final responsibility as director of the program, I was also an ‘actor’ in most of the narratives, and due to my daily presence in the organization I ‘co-built’ the narratives. In these situations, instead of retrieving and collecting narratives, it is more accurate to refer to generating/co-generating narratives or constructing/co-constructing them. From the beginning of the research process, the executive management of SAA actively encouraged the deployment of more storytellers from all levels of the organization, for example by asking employees to share their stories with the group during meetings. After some time, employees spontaneously volunteered to share their story with the others. This created an environment in which employees felt safe to take a vulnerable position, and the ‘art of storytelling’ spread through the organization in a natural way, resulting in a rich harvest of stories.

As much as possible I searched the narratives for dilemmas and tensions that have arisen in practice when the actors encountered unexpected situations and for their corresponding considerations and choices. I then looked at the consequences of the dilemmas and choices for the adaptive capacity and mutual trust in the relationship between commissioning authority and contractor. This enabled me to establish the foundation for the subsequent step: giving meaning to the narratives, and initiating the interaction between sensemaking and sensegiving.

Several storylines emerged from the field study. In the first storyline, it can be seen that contracts are not always entirely clear or watertight in practice, and that some situations require acting as the circumstances require. This can
be seen especially in the narratives about whether or not to impose availability corrections or penalties. Although the contracts are usually rather clear on these aspects, the effects can be different than originally intended and may sometimes require a different mode of action. It can also be seen that clauses in contracts are sometimes not as clear for the other party as assumed. Changes are often required, and if multiple parties, such as municipalities, are involved in the process of making changes, this may only increase the confusion. A second storyline concerns being able to mitigate risks by not holding strictly to the provisions in the contract, but daring to look at the project in a broader context. For example, this is important when the contractor’s risks stipulated in the contract threaten to turn into political risks for the commissioning authority or when there is a conflict between project planning, traffic disruption and environmental nuisance.

The overarching dominant storyline, which actually comprises the foregoing storylines, concerns the development of mutual trust and the resulting strengthening of adaptive capacity in the relationship. These themes return in various narratives. The openness in communication and the courage to view things from the perspective of the other party enabled mutual trust to develop steadily. As a result, the adaptive capacity in the relationship also increased and the mutual shock absorbing cushion was filled.

**Scientific accountability**

Research into the phenomenon of the emergence of narratives in organizations, with their dimensions, versatility and ambiguity, and the process of giving meaning to one’s experience through these narratives, lends itself well to an interpretive organizational ethnographic approach. Ethnographic research focuses mainly on how processes in organizations develop over a longer period of time; instead of taking snapshots of organizations at a specific time, this type of research can effectively show what actually happens in an organization when new narratives become dominant over old ones, and what meaning can be given to these narratives. If the ethnographic researcher is part of the organization he is investigating, or if he is an employee of that organization, and is therefore also part of the object of research, this is known as auto-ethnographic research. A characteristic of this research method is that the auto-ethnographic researcher, based on his own experience and knowledge of the context, can give meaning to what happens in practice from a personal perspective in an autobiographical style. Indeed, recognizing ambiguities and contradictions, and the resulting struggles among participants in the project environment, would
be difficult when observing them from the sidelines. As a result, the researcher is not an objective outsider, but someone who helps to construct the narrative.

The present study is based on a combination of auto-ethnography and intervention research, in which the researcher not only observes but also does something with the observations (intervenes) to see what happens in a longer-term context. I have therefore labeled my research method as *auto-ethnoventionist*, a combination of auto-ethnographic and intervention research (and elaborating on the *ethnovention* approach introduced previously in literature). This approach, in which scientific research and application in practice are combined, fits in an almost natural way with my own dual role as interpretive researcher and as Program Director of the Schiphol-Amsterdam-Almere infrastructure program (SAA). Besides being a researcher, I am not only part of the SAA organization, but am also in charge of it and therefore provide direction to the changes within the organization and the cooperative relationship with other parties. It is precisely because of my years of experience in the infrastructure sector that I have been able to understand and give meaning to the observations I made during my research.

An auto-ethnographic approach, with its associated role duality, also has disadvantages in terms of reliability and integrity. Through reflexivity regarding this role duality, as well as transparency and regular citation of other sources, I have tried to limit these disadvantages as much as possible and prevent them for negating the benefits of the approach.

Together with the foregoing, the narratives thus became ‘collective co-constructions’ by various people, including myself, who were involved in various project situations and who have given meaning to them from their own frame of reference. Importantly, these are not narratives in which it is objectively stated what ‘really’ happened. Based on the premise that the ‘reality’ in human interaction is socially constructed, this is obviously impossible; there is no objectively measurable reality. Indeed, this was not the aim of the narratives. The essential aim was to present the narratives in such a way that the underlying core is as clear as possible to the reader and the desired effect in terms of sensegiving is achieved. With the narratives I have tried to link my personal experiences to social and organizational sensegiving, which would have been less feasible if I had used a more traditional research design. Based on the foregoing, it can be concluded that in my research theory and practice have continuously merged into each other. In the present study, I have shown how this formerly theoretical concept of *auto-ethnoventionism* can be applied in practice and can actually
lead to results. Consequently this approach has outcomes for both theory and practice, and is therefore in line with what is described in science as engaged scholarship.

Analysis, discussion and conclusions

The narratives about SAA have shown that over the years a process of change has been set in motion within the project environment of SAA and its cooperating partners. The narratives about dilemmas and cooperation have become richer over time, and the number of narratives has increased steadily: narratives create new narratives. In this way the entirety of narratives and their development can be seen as a meta-narrative about a search for a different approach to infrastructure projects, during which the partners continuously struggled to find a balance between contract-based management and cooperation based on mutual trust, resilience and adaptive capacity in the relationship. This struggle, which continually recurs in the narratives, can be clearly positioned in the scientific debate on structure versus agency. This debate is based on the duality in institutional structures, which must provide context and support on which employees can base their actions, but simultaneously leads to these same employees continuously questioning and modifying these structures. Formulated differently, the rules that an organization sets for itself to create order inherently limit the maneuvering space of that organization in the future.

Obviously, the narratives also contain experiences about which people will say ‘I am doing that already’ which can quickly lead to the conclusion that ‘there is nothing new under the sun’. This may indeed be the case for these individuals, but the important aspect is the catalyzing effect for the entire organization. Change is not so much the result of a single narrative, but it concerns the impact of all the narratives. In this way, the narratives have a guiding function, in the sense that they can initiate and guide a change in a certain direction. If narratives are told and repeated often enough, they automatically become a meaningful framework that replicates and maintains itself and thus inspires similar, new narratives. In this way, these narratives help to give shape to the meta-narrative – or grand narrative – about the development and implementation of the concept of resilient partnership within SAA. However, no generally applicable normative methods or recommendations can be derived from these narratives that are directly transferrable to other project environments. Indeed, doing so would disregard the unique and location-specific character of those other project environments. Precisely because the individual perceptions and the context
in which they take place are so decisive, this is not an approach that can simply be replicated (like a recipe) in a different situation or project environment. In every project the participants will have to reflect anew on their experiences and will have to create their own narratives. The parties involved in the project will have to discover this for themselves. In this way, the narratives contained in this thesis do not in themselves represent a generalized reality, but they can lead to ‘natural generalizations’, i.e. points of recognition and new insights that other project managers can incorporate in their own daily activities and interactions. From these insights I have derived a number of more broadly applicable action strategies – or coping strategies – for resilient partnership. See the table above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Orientation</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>on time</td>
<td>Timing</td>
<td>It is not a good tactic to always row against the current and deviate from the rules too often. It is a question of ‘choosing your battles’ and picking the right moment to act; moving with the current and ‘playing by the book’ is often the best option.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Stalling</td>
<td>Progress is crucial for every project. To maintain momentum in the project, however, it is important to deliberately make time together with the partners to look ahead and to pay attention to signals and intuition. As a result unexpected events can anticipated more effectively, so that timely action can be taken.</td>
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<tr>
<td>on context</td>
<td>Framing</td>
<td>By framing a project in a certain way, space can be created to act differently.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Structuring</td>
<td>The use of symbolism and metaphors can help to better understand the functioning of an organization or a cooperative relationship (sensemaking), but can also help management to clarify the intended direction of change (sensegiving). An example of such a metaphor is the shock-absorbing cushion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>on human interaction</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>Accept that different perspectives can exist in parallel and give people the opportunity – through reflection – to open their frame of reference to view things from these other perspectives. This will expand their own frame of reference and can create mental space for new understanding.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feeling</td>
<td>This strategy focuses on the relationship and involves a normative appeal to the other party: reciprocity when building trust, with a rational and an emotional side.</td>
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</table>
Which strategy will have the most impact in which situation obviously depends on a multitude of factors, such as the nature of the situation, the context, the previous history and especially the people involved, with their own frames of reference and personal interests.

With the above action strategies for resilient partnership, I have established a link between the theoretical insights and the interpretative result of empiricism, as forms of agency within an overarching management structure.

Regarding the question of what meaning actors give to the concept of resilient partnership, we can conclude that the narratives in this thesis focus mainly on giving shape to effective collaboration. I base this assessment partly on the picture that has been created by actors on both sides of the cooperation spectrum. In the project environment of SAA, attempts have been made to encourage employees to deliberately reflect on their actions, give meaning to what is happening around them and to record this in narratives. By sharing this sensegiving, an interactive and collective process of sensemaking was set in motion, and by selectively enhancing sensemaking through sensegiving, new narratives were created. As a result, these narratives could serve as a trigger for change.