

# **Institutional Work and Infrastructure public-private partnerships (PPPs): Religious Symbolism and Power as Enablers of PPP Projects**

## **Abstract**

The project management literature increasingly adopts neo-institutional theory to analyze how institutional pressures affect the implementation of infrastructure projects. In this paper, the micro-dynamics through which actors enact responses to institutional structuration in the expansion and transformation of an airport from a public entity into a public-private partnership (PPP) in Saudi Arabia is investigated. The case analysis shows that *social integration as religious symbolism work* triggered *system integration work*, which expanded the power capabilities of individual actors leading the project. *Repair work* then followed to alleviate negative effects of disempowering the agency of actors directly affected by the PPP model and to streamline the project implementation process. The paper contributes new insights regarding the roles of religious symbolism, allied with social and system integration of power relations in implementing PPP projects.

## **Introduction**

While mega-infrastructure projects and public-private partnerships (PPPs) share many commonalities, they are currently debated in separate streams of research. Similar to mega-infrastructure projects, infrastructure PPP projects exceed US \$1 billion, involve several actors representing the public, private, and professional domains, and have a considerable impact upon millions of people (Flyvbjerg, 2014). PPP; however, is not a panacea, and practical experience shows that several high-profile PPP projects have undergone budget and time overruns and even failures during the construction or operation phases (Jooste & Scott, 2012a; Bel et al., 2010). Interest in market-based reforms such as PPP is driven by an ambition to harness private sector's business acumen in service delivery (Chamberlin & Jackson, 1987; Bel et al., 2010)

Due to the diverse range of approaches studying PPPs (Weihe, 2008), the PPP phenomenon (Scharle, 2002) has been described as having a “polysemic nature” (Mazouz, Facal & Viola, 2008, p. 99), resulting in a plethora of definitions that serve only to increase the concept's ambiguity. For the purposes of this paper, PPPs are defined as “long-term contracts or arrangements” in which the private sector is “involved in the design, building, maintenance and/or operation of a public infrastructure” (Koppenjan, 2008, p. 1991), which it co-finances. An emerging trend in the PPP literature is the adoption of neo-institutional theory to analyze PPP projects' implementation (Jooste & Scott, 2012a). A review of this literature reveals two central themes: 1) the impact of external isomorphic pressures on the choice of PPP for infrastructure delivery and 2), the role of PPP-enabling organizations in facilitating PPP implementation. As such, they have largely ignored “what happens inside the black box of mega projects” (Söderlund, Sankaran & Biesenthal, 2017, p. 9), and this leaves unexplored the

agentic and power dynamics through which the interplay between individual actors and institutional structures occur.

The paper neither overstates macro-institutional effects on projects nor overlooks the micro perspective. Rather, it attempts to strike a balance between them and argues that departing from the micro-level might enable us to capture actors' actions and reveal their strategies as they urge other actors to support their ideas (Lawrence, Leca & Zilber, 2013). Scott (2014), in a celebrated definition, regards institutions as “regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life” (p. 56). They are the “shared rules, beliefs and practices...enacted and (re)produced by various actors” within various organizations (Tukiainen & Granqvist, 2016, p. 1835), mutually constituting their institutional universes.

To achieve its objectives, this paper adopts the approach of institutional work defined as “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). Because this framework allows a micro view of the activities and strategies of institutional actors and portrays them as “reflective, goal-oriented and capable” agents, it can potentially uncover the tactics actors use to acquire and use power to affect existing forms of project organizing (Lawrence et al., 2013, p. 1024). As such, the central research question of this study is: *What types of institutional work do individual actors perform to gain power to initiate PPPs and how are the resultant modes of power employed to drive the implementation process forward?*

Saudi Arabia is a suitable empirical setting in which to answer this question because PPPs have not been the institutionalized or legitimate form of infrastructure delivery in the past. When the extension of Medina Airport was privately financed and then transformed from a public entity into a private one in 2012 PPPs entered the scene. Exploring how individual actors

managed to implement such a divergent change and navigate institutional structures to implement new forms of projects is the story we recount and analyze. In doing so, we advance neo-institutional theory and project management in three major ways. First, we expand the means through which institutional work affects institutions. *Religious symbolism work*, as a specific form of institutional work, allows actors to exploit shared religious beliefs to acquire political power in order to implement new forms of project delivery. Second, we broaden the analysis of organizational power to encompass religious, royal, political and administrative powers and explain how these propel project implementation processes. Finally, we analyze the interplay between agency and structure to produce analytical insight into the lives and actions of agents inside projects.

The paper is organized as follows. First, a literature review discusses recent uses of institutional theory to explain the implementation of PPP projects and illustrates the lacuna of a micro-perspective. The institutional work approach is presented together with the reasons why it can provide deeper insights into how actors are able to exploit existing power dynamics to affect the existing institutional structure. The case design, data-gathering and analysis techniques follow before the presentation of research findings. Finally, the paper's theoretical contributions are discussed.

## **The impact of institutional context on PPP projects**

The following section reviews the evolving, but disjointed body of research that *explicitly* uses the label of “institutional theory” to analyze which factors determine the adoption of PPP as a form of project delivery. The PPP literature in project management has centered on either isomorphism or organizational fields, yet without incorporating micro-level analysis.

### ***Isomorphic pressures and adoption of PPP***

When academic research constantly reports political controversies (Khadaroo, 2005), technical complexities and great risks and uncertainties muddling the implementation of infrastructure PPPs (Hodge, Greve & Biygautane, 2018), not to mention their dubious claims of value for money and efficiency gains (Biygautane, 2017), why do governments continue to adopt PPPs? Neo-institutionalism's "explanation of the similarity ('isomorphism') and stability of organizational arrangements" offers a useful framework to answer this question (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996, p. 1023). The adoption of PPPs by many PPP-skeptical governments is ostensibly justifiable in light of the interplay among several isomorphic pressures. For example, Khadaroo (2005) has attributed the emergence of the UK's PFI standard-setting process to three factors: coercive pressures exercised by the UK's Treasury, normative pressures stemming from the accounting profession, and mimetic forces that saw public sector organizations plagiarizing each other's submissions to the Treasury. At a more comparative level, Connolly, Reeves and Wall (2009) have found that, despite the certainty of government actors in Ireland that PPPs would not offer higher value for money as propounded by PPP enthusiasts, "indications from the UK government that PPP was the only game in town" meant that it became "the only option" for delivering school infrastructure (p. 10). The same study revealed that, while Ireland's local government knew about the "negative aspects of PPPs in the UK," they still "persisted with the PPP model and sought legitimacy through its adoption" (p. 12).

A recent study by Sheppard & Beck (2016) has contended that, while Ireland's central government originally introduced the UK's PPP model as a voluntary option to modernize its public administration, it is now increasingly pushing the adoption of PPPs for infrastructure delivery. Ireland's public-sector organizations are now reported as reluctantly pursuing PPPs simply to maintain institutional legitimacy (Sheppard and Beck, 2016). Moreover, Jooste, Levitt, and Scott (2011) have found that mimetic pressures explain the diffusion of

infrastructure PPPs from the UK into British Columbia (Canada), Victoria (Australia), and South Africa. Several actors from those countries travelled to the UK to learn from its PFI model or hired consultants with such experience in order to replicate the UK's example.

### *Organizational fields and structuration*

There have been cancellations of several contracts for high-profile PPP projects (Jooste & Scott, 2012a) as well as reports of their failure to deliver the promised value for money (Connolly et al., 2009). Many PPP scholars have responded to this situation of apparent failure by adopting organizational fields as a unit of analysis to examine how organizations support PPP programs. Organizational fields are “in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services and products” (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, p. 148). The field perspective enables a shift from “an organization-centric or dyadic to a more systemic level of analysis,” which captures not only “organizations in environments but ... the organization of the environment” (Scott, 2008, p. 434). Fields thus serve as an intermediate layer between the internal dynamics of PPPs and the wider social context. Jooste and Scott (2012b) have stated that the complexity of PPP projects requires developing an institutional field: they nominate the capacity of public sector organizations, increasing PPP's legitimacy, and balancing the interests of the public, private, and civic sectors as key issues in its establishment. Such requirements, they suggest, can be provided only through “PPP-enabling organizational fields,” which include sponsoring departments, PPP units, transaction advisors, regulators, advocacy associations, and development agencies (Jooste & Scott, 2012b, p. 22).

Several comparative studies have, consequently, begun to examine the significance of PPP-enabling organizations. Mahalingam, Devkar, and Kalidindi (2011) have suggested that the effectiveness of coordination agencies (PPP units) increases considerably when they are

involved in the entire project cycle, especially if they ensure the transfer of PPP-related expertise to government departments. Jooste and Scott (2012a), however, have argued that a stand-alone PPP unit is insufficient. Instead, when a group of public, private, and not-for-profit entities work *together*, they exert a stronger impact on PPPs' implementation. Sheppard and Beck (2016) confirm this claim while listing government strategies that effectively translated into increased adoption of PPPs in Ireland. Nonetheless, Verhoest et al., (2015) question the full impact of PPP-enabling organizations on PPP projects and found that, while organizational support for PPP was important, it was insufficient to account for a greater uptake of PPPs.

Only a few PPP scholars have recently adopted the structuration perspective to understand how the socio-political features and blueprints of their institutional contexts are carried in PPP-related fields (Scott & Levitt, 2017). Structuration theory states that social structures contain organized rules and resources that “are not brought into being by social actors, but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves *as* actors. In and through their activities, agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible” (Giddens, 1984, p. 2). As cases in point, Jooste, Levitt and Scott (2011) have analyzed why although governments in Australia, Canada and South Africa all gained insights from the “the UK’s Private Finance Initiative (PFI) as a first ‘PPP-enabling field’ and an exemplar for other countries,” their PPP-enabling fields ended up evolving differently (p. 12). By investigating the interplay among institutional systems in the three countries, the activities of certain actors, and the mechanisms they adopted to create PPP-enabling mechanisms, the authors confirmed structuration theory’s assertion that actors “bring about the formation of the field and change in it over time” (p. 22) in a manner that reflects prevailing political and social preferences.

Likewise, Mahalingam and Delhi (2012) have examined why PPP-enabling fields evolved differently in three similar Indian states that experienced the same coercive pressure from their

central government to adopt PPPs. They concluded that, when the actors viewed PPPs as being aligned with their own interests, they formulated PPP-supporting organizational fields. In contrast, those that saw their interests threatened by the PPP model designed PPP-opposing organizational fields. The findings of their article direct attention toward the “agency of field actors” (p. 183) and reinforce the premise that organizational fields are subject to change or continuity based on the interests and capacities of field actors. Matos-Castaño, Mahalingam, and Dewulf (2014) traced the reasons why PPPs’ requirements, such as capacity, trust, and legitimacy, were successfully diffused in the organizational field of the Netherlands but failed to materialize in India. They found that since PPPs fit the political and social expectations of policymakers in the Netherlands, those actors institutionalized the required mechanisms to support PPPs’ implementation. The lack of such interest among policymakers in India was behind the absence of such supporting mechanisms and led to the subsequent decline of PPPs.

To summarize, the role of individual agency has not been incorporated into mega-PPP debate; in contrast, the focus on “fields” remains restricted to how the “activities and interactions of a set of organizations” determine PPP project implementation outcomes (van den Hurk & Verhoest, 2015, p. 4).

### **Institutional work and the micro-dynamics of individual agency and power**

In this section the concept of institutional work is introduced. Using this concept, a micro-level of analysis that uncovers the strategies and tactics employed by individual actors to access and use power, so that they can enforce novel forms of project organizing, can be discussed.

#### ***Institutional work and balancing between agency and structure***

Institutional work is defined as “the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting” institutional norms and rules that govern organizations



(Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). It portrays individual actors as autonomous centers of action in institutional fields. Institutional work acknowledges that individual agency is neither the outcome of actors' institutional embeddedness, nor is it immune to its influence. Instead, individual actors are endowed with the capacity to reflect on their institutional surrounding, "develop conscious intentionality," and plan strategic actions and activities to "affect their social symbolic context" (Phillips & Lawrence, 2012, p. 223). The emphasis on intentionality and effort distinguishes institutional work from earlier concepts of neo-institutional theory.

Institutional work begins by exploring *why* and *how* actors intentionally and purposefully engage in both the practices and processes of organizational or institutional change, regardless of whether or not they accomplish their goals. Departing from the why and how is important, since this can address structuration theory's silence concerning how actors' knowledge and awareness of their context develops, which micro-activities they adopt and how any resultant conflicts or tensions between individual agency and structural controlling mechanisms play out (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). This dialectic relationship represents a two-dimensional view in which agency and structure are neither fully independent nor oppressed by each other. Rather, they are subject to individual actors' interventions to maintain, disrupt or change the institutional status quo.

### ***Institutional work and power***

Actors' initiatives to carry out institutional work and introduce organizational practices that diverge from the status quo often encounter resistance from both the institutional field and the individuals and organizations directly affected by the change (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013). The analysis of power is relevant to analyzing how institutional work undermines such controlling effects of structure and can reveal the actions through which individual agency overpowers a structure's constraining pressures (Rye, 2015). Overemphasis on isomorphism resulted in the

“element of power ... [being] largely absent from engagement with DiMaggio and Powell’s work” (Clegg, 2010, p. 5). As Lawrence (2008, p. 175) has argued, most of the subsequent research based on DiMaggio and Powell’s seminal work examined how the choices of actors or organizations were influenced by certain isomorphic forces within their institutional fields “left out an explicit consideration of power” that would describe how actors are obliged to do what they would not do otherwise (Lawrence, 2008).

The concept of power is complex and elastic, and its definitions vary depending on the field. For the purposes of this research, the examination of power is narrowed down to its conceptualization within the organizational studies literature (Clegg, 1989; Lawrence, Winn & Jennings, 2001; Lawrence, Mauws & Dyck, 2005), which defines power as “a relational effect, not property that can be held by someone or something” (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013, p. 270). Based on this definition, power is only explicit when it is exercised through relationships among actors and organizations (Clegg, 1989), manifested in the ways that “the behaviors, attitudes, or opportunities of an actor are affected by another actor, system, or technology” (Lawrence, Malhotra & Morris, 2012, p.105).

In organizational analysis, power has been postulated as operating through two modes: “episodic” and “systemic” (Lawrence et al., 2001; Lawrence & Robinson, 2007). Episodic power consists of the “relatively discrete, strategic acts of mobilization initiated by self-interested actors,” and represents the clearest expression of the agency of specific and recognizable individual or organizational actors (Lawrence et al., 2001, p. 629). Systemic power, meanwhile, operates “through the routine, ongoing practices of organizations” and is embedded “in the social systems that constitute organizations” (Lawrence & Robinson, 2007, p. 384). Hence, this mode of power is not attributed to specific individuals but is coded within overarching cultural and organizational systems. Some writers, such as Clegg (1989), make a

further distinction is defining circuits of power by distinguishing social from system integration, stressing the role that exogenous events, or environmental contingencies, have on integration.

What forms do these modes of power take, and how do they affect actors and organizations? Lawrence et al., (2001) have argued that when actors use episodic power and approach their targets as subjects with the capacity to choose whether to do something (Clegg, 1989), they use *influence* to persuade them of the benefits of certain action. Influence is carried out through informal networks and relies on persuasive accounts and negotiations that are particularly important to justify why a new trajectory or organizational model is important, making this form of power particularly useful during the starting phases of new initiatives (Lawrence, 2008). However, when organizational actors are treated as objects (incapable of choice), *force* is applied coercively through formal organizational hierarchies to leave them no choice but to do something that they would not otherwise do, either because it does not serve either a personal or organizational sense of their interests (Lawrence & Robinson, 2007). The two are often entangled, of course, the one the bearer of the other.

Although systemic power may be empirically invisible, manifest through tacit pressures on actors and organizations, it differentially effects actors when they are considered as either subjects or objects. When actors are treated as subjects, social power is exercised as *discipline*, which “shapes the identities of targets and...leads them to act in specific ways,” and subsequently and indirectly affects the choices that those actors make (Lawrence & Robinson, 2007, p. 389). However, when actors are treated as objects, systemic power is manifested as a mode of *domination* that indirectly restricts choices through informal representations of systemic power in the guise of culturally taken-for-granted practices, as well as more formal

representations, such as the controlling effects of bureaucratic systems in which the actors operate (Lawrence, 2008).

Systemic, social and episodic modes of power are tightly intertwined and operate in “circuits” whereby each fuels the other (Clegg, 1989). To better articulate how these modes of power function in a social context, Pitkin’s (1972) concept of *power over* is used to describe systemic power, while *power to* refers to episodic power. Power over means power “over other people, [or] enforcement of one’s own intentions over those of others,” while power to means “an ability to do or achieve something independent of others,” including indirectly through routine and bureaucratic ways (Göhler, 2009, p. 28). As such, power over constantly restricts the choices of those subjected to it, “disempowers” their capacity, and limits their fields of action (Rye, 2015). The focus of power to, in contrast, is not on its effect on others subjected to it but on its “empowerment” of other actors to act more autonomously and to gain a comparative advantage over other actors in the field. Sometimes this is achieved in order to overpower the agency of others; other times it may conjoin with others to expand collective agency. The delicate interconnectedness between power over and power to means that, in order to access power over, actors need the capacity to exercise power to; however, exercising the power to do something is also dependent upon having access to power over resources and people (Clegg & Kreiner, 2013).

While these forms of power are well-documented in the organizational analysis literature, what is unclear is the type of institutional work that triggers systemic power and in turn legitimizes new forms of project organizing and how actors build upon this emerging power to implement projects. This paper investigates the role of episodic power to “initiate change by advocating key ideas and persuading actors to experiment with new behaviours” (Lawrence et al., 2011, p. 109), while also examining how social and systemic power is exercised over existing

regulatory and bureaucratic structures to empower and enable individual actors to carry out their work.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Context***

Saudi Arabia is a context in which public procurement has been the only institutionalized method of infrastructure service delivery over the past 70 years (Biygautane, 2017). The existing legal and regulatory frameworks have been incompatible with the requirements of complex PPP contracts. The Government Tenders and Procurement Law (GTPL) that governs tendering of infrastructure projects did not allow private finance for public infrastructure, or possess the flexibility required for designing PPP contracts (Ashurst, 2013). Government entities have been required to use approved standard contracts that transfer all construction risks to the private sector, limiting the capacity to negotiate contracts, denying arbitration and choice of jurisdiction, and forcing the private sector to continue construction even in cases of government default and failure to pay (Capital, 2013; Ashurst, 2016).

The normative pressures for global diffusion of PPP projects do not exist in Saudi Arabia. High government revenues from oil exports have meant that financial constraints driving Western governments to private finance did not exist in Saudi Arabia, nor were the promises of higher efficiency and value for money important either, as the overall bureaucratic system in the country did not prioritize efficiency or innovation in service delivery (Biygautane, Gerber & Hodge, 2017). The bureaucracy was rather accommodation for local talents that might not flourish in more exposed and less sheltered environments. Particular patterns of institutionalization have flourished in infrastructure projects in this context. The construction sector in Saudi Arabia is tightly dominated and controlled by powerful business families with

important networks of patronage positioning them as the government's preferred bidders for large contracts (House, 2013). Foreign investors and bidders are disadvantaged when competing for government contracts and corruption is endemic in the construction industry (Al-Riyadh, 2013). As such, the lack of effective mechanisms for monitoring the accountability and transparency of the construction sector result in many cases of exploitation of public finances, extensive delays, and incomplete projects (Al-Riyadh, 2009).

### ***The case of Medina Airport***

Medina Airport is a case of divergent organizational change for two reasons. First, the airport had operated under the government's umbrella since 1972 (IFC, 2012), and the choice of a build-transfer-operate (BTO) contract to expand and operate the airport meant disconnecting from the public sector template and *abruptly* introducing an untested market ethos. It was a shift that would affect not only the technical operations of the airport but also its identity and organizational culture by forcing a drastic change in the ways in which employees and management of the airport worked. Second, extending the airport through BTO contract meant involvement of private finance, which would require new legal and administrative requirements that the Saudi bureaucracy was unprepared to provide. The successful execution of this mega-infrastructure project in such an institutional environment meant that the agents leading the project's implementation had to manage resistance from private actors that dominated the construction sector, public organizations and institutions that did not understand or believe in the need for PPP at the airport, and, most importantly, the resistance of the airport staff who would be forced to become private sector employees rather than bureaucrats accommodated in an organization indifferent to commercial pressures.

### ***Research design and data collection***

A single case study design is well-suited to the exploratory and inductive nature of the research (Yin, 2014). This method offers empirically rich and thick description of events, such as the dynamic processes, practices, and types of institutional work carried out by actors and organizations to deliver the project under investigation (Lawrence et al., 2009), which would otherwise be difficult to observe through quantitative methods. It captures complex processes over time, enables researchers to identify key actors and investigate how events develop, allowing for immediate reframing of questions as unexpected information emerges through interviews (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

The data collection techniques used to answer the research question were commensurate with the chosen case study design. The research relied on face-to-face, semi-structured interviews ranging from 40 to 90 minutes in length conducted with key informants. In total, 19 interviews were conducted between March 2016 and August 2017 in the Saudi Arabian cities of Jeddah, Medina and Riyadh by the first author. Published news articles and personal social networks were relied on to identify and access initial interviewees and the snowball technique was adopted (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to identify informants who were central to the project and leveraged influence in its implementation. To ensure that many voices were included, to minimize retrospective bias problems and to confirm the reliability of the data (Yin, 2014), individuals from across different levels of the hierarchy and various sectors were interviewed.

Among the interviewees were:

- five senior government officials,
- three private sector representatives,
- four senior consultants (two legal and two management),
- two engineers,
- two senior bank representatives,

- a senior employee of Saudi Airlines,
- two senior representatives of an international organization.

Archival data was also relied on to triangulate the interview findings with more objective analyses of the factors supporting the project (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Government and consultancy reports, speeches by the Saudi Monarch, discourses of some importance important in an autocracy, as well as newspaper articles, were also used. While the total of 41 documents covered mostly the political, legal and regulatory factors affecting the project, broader academic resources were also drawn upon, which covered normative and cultural-cognitive aspects of Saudi Arabia.

### ***Data analysis***

Data analysis was conducted following a deductive and inductive approach congruent with common practice in qualitative studies. Analysis began by reading the transcripts of the interviews alongside secondary sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of how key events, activities, and project milestones evolved chronologically and led to the airport's transformation (Table 1). At this stage, NVivo 11 was used to conduct systematic analysis and assess the empirical prevalence of emerging analytical themes. The first step in analysis was to sift through the data to identify and code motivations and actions of actors who triggered and pursued the PPP idea and their reasons for its advocacy. It was found that the chairman of General Authority for Civil Aviation (GACA) and head of the International Finance Cooperation (IFC) office in Saudi Arabia led the PPP effort, each having different reasons for following the PPP route, while the PPP Team leader was assigned with the task of implementing the project by mediating between public, private, and professional actors.

Table 1: Chronology of events



<b>Month/Year</b>	<b>Event</b>
<b>12/2000</b>	Expansion and modernization of Medina Airport on agenda of Council of Ministers
<b>06/2006</b>	King announces transformation of Medina Airport into international airport
<b>05/2008</b>	GACA commissions the IFC to conduct feasibility study for Medina Airport based on a PPP model
<b>11/2008</b>	Supreme Economic Council issues Decree 29/4, approving expansion of Medina Airport on PPP basis
<b>02/2009</b>	Steering Committee is appointed
<b>07/2009</b>	King issues Royal Order to deliver Medina Airport as PPP
<b>10/2009</b>	Roadshow and marketing are conducted for the airport's business case
<b>03/2010</b>	Companies invited to prequalify
<b>08/2010</b>	Official draft of the Request for Proposals (RFP) is issued
<b>08/2011</b>	Preferred bidders are announced
<b>10/2011</b>	BTO agreement is signed
<b>06/2012</b>	Financial closure is achieved, and airport facilities are transferred to private operator
<b>04/2015</b>	New airport facilities are delivered six months ahead of schedule
<b>06/2015</b>	King officially inaugurates Medina Airport, and commercial operation begins

Next, open coding was applied to the interview data (Van Maanen, 1979) to identify concepts used by the informants. Based on the type of institutional work and the individuals or organizations that carried it out the interview data was categorized, and then emergent themes were identified. Initially, institutional work representing instances of episodic power carried out by the chairman of GACA and head of the IFC office to influence and persuade political actors of the importance of the PPP model for the airport were identified. Their arguments were coded into first-order themes (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013). The following second-order themes were found: “facing considerable delays to expand the airport through public procurement necessitated a faster project delivery method such as PPP”; “arguing that facilitating pilgrims’ journeys to visit the two Islamic holy mosques is Saudi Arabia’s duty toward Muslims” and “using PPP to increase the airport’s capacity meant more landing slots...and higher numbers of pilgrims”. Axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was performed, with the team going back and forth between theory and data to connect the second-

order themes to aggregate dimensions. The label *social integration as religious symbolism work* was used to categorize the episodic power represented by arguments and justifications used by the chairman of GACA and head of the IFC office to influence and activate political interest in the project. Such religious symbolism work was bedrock to their commitment that the PPP model was the *only* practical solution to deliver the project successfully.

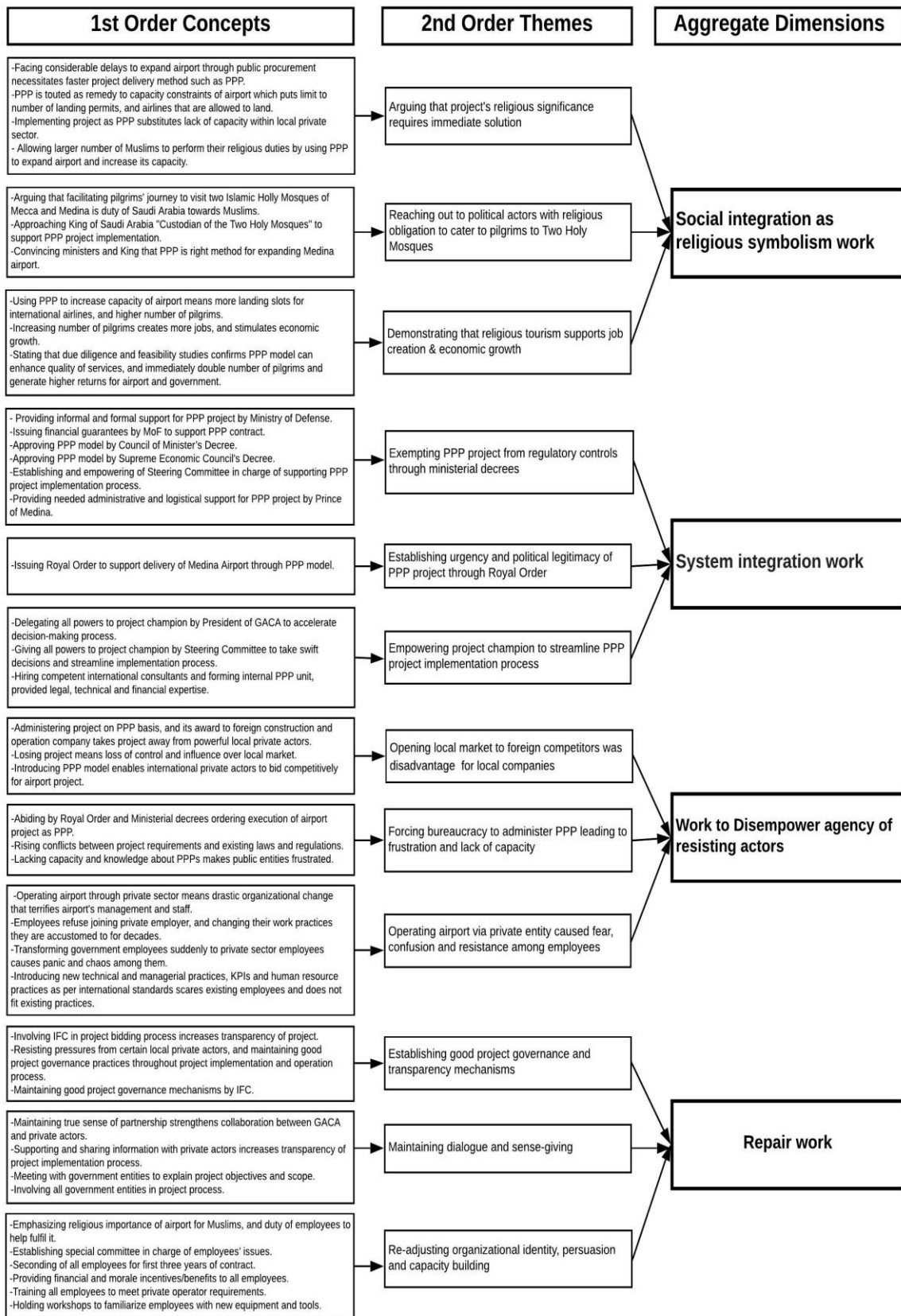
The same analytical method was used to search for instances of social and systemic power and its manifestations. For the purposes of this research, it was important to first understand the basis of such power and how it was accessed or activated by the two actors initiating the project, as well as the arguments they used for each individual/organization to which they reached out (Table 2). The research sought out how systemic power led to empowerment of the PPP project, and how this altered the institutionalized and routinized ways in which the Saudi bureaucracy administered infrastructure projects. It was found that systemic power had two functions. First, a Royal Order acted as the dispositional form of power (Clegg, 1989) that established the political legitimacy and urgency of delivering the project on a PPP basis. A Royal Order is an especially strong mandate of social integration in Saudi society, governed as it is by an absolutist monarchy. Second, ministerial power freed the PPP project from regulatory and bureaucratic controls that might otherwise have blocked its implementation, while the “professional disciplinary power” of the PPP Team Leader streamlined and lubricated the system integration of the entire implementation process (Table 3).

Empowerment of the PPP project meant the immediate “disempowerment” of the agency of several individual and organizational actors. It stripped the project from out of the hands of local private actors, altering the ways in which the bureaucratic system administered projects, with a considerable impact on how individual actors worked at the airport. The coercive consequences of systemic power for these actors and the *repair work* conducted by GACA and

the winning consortium to alleviate the effects of forcing the PPP project on the institutional structure were identified.

Sensegiving, defined as the “process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991, p. 442), proved important in explaining to government agencies and airport management and staff the importance of the project for the country and for Muslims generally. Readjustment of organizational identity (Bailey & Raelin, 2015) was the major institutional work carried out by GACA’s team, together with its private-sector partners, in order to reconstruct the airport’s organizational cultures to fit the new realities of working with the private sector. This work aimed to “reduce the tensions internally between its organizational identity and the new practices associated with the new logic” (Gawer & Phillips, 2013, p. 1057), requiring several activities and strategies, ranging from material and moral incentives to educating employees and building their capacity and readiness for change (Bailey & Raelin, 2015; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Finally, the data structure (Figure 1) was developed to theorize the relationships between themes and aggregate dimensions, most importantly to develop a process model that demonstrates the recursive relationships between the types of institutional work and different forms of power.

Figure 1: Data structure



## **Findings**

We begin by demonstrating why GACA (a typical Saudi government entity) decided to break away from the institutionalized form of project delivery and tout PPP as an effective method for expanding and operating its airport (*intentionality*), rather than using the highly institutionalized and traditional public procurement model. Then, we present the institutional work (*effort*) that they conducted to acquire and use power to drive the implementation process forward.

### ***Trigger and obstacles***

*Familiarity with market-like practices.* The empirical findings revealed that, although GACA was a government instrumentality embedded in Saudi bureaucratic inertia, its top leadership endeavored to instill market-like practices internally. GACA aimed to improve the quality of its airports, enhance customer services and satisfaction, eventually to corporatize and privatize airport assets. As a former chairman of GACA stated, “Saudi is a very difficult place to do business, but I used to say that, at GACA, we could do much better than other government entities.” Such objectives, which would seldom be considered seriously in other Saudi government departments, guided GACA to greater engagement with the private sector in delivering services through competitive bids. A senior official at IFC said, “I think GACA was one of the leaders among the government entities in Saudi in terms of outsourcing its activities and working with the private sector and that was owing to its strategy to bring the private sector to the aviation sector.” One private sector consultant stated that GACA had developed the internal capacity to “design and develop projects that were output-based with specific deliverables, rules, KPIs, and requirements, and asked the private sector to bid on that basis.”

*Technical need.* The facilities of the Medina Airport had not been refurbished or expanded since its opening in 1972 (Ballantyne, 2011). When the King announced its transformation into an international airport in 2006 (Al-Riyadh, 2006) the airport “was in desperate need of an overhaul to cope with increasing arrivals,” which exceeded 3.5 million in 2009 (a 50% increase from the previous year), “making it the largest increase across all the Kingdom’s airports” (Fenton, 2010, p. 2). The airport is a major port of entry for the faithful making the *Hajj*. The airport management and operation could not cope with the passenger growth, which averaged 21% annually at the time and predicted to reach 14 million by 2035 (Ballantyne, 2011). Although the airport operated year-round, as explained by a GACA operations manager, it experienced “the largest number of passengers for two months each year during the pilgrimage season, and the airport struggled to manage that process efficiently.” Due to constrained capacity, considerable international traffic had to be turned away, with increasing requests from airlines to obtain landing permits being declined.

IFC was commissioned by GACA to draft a comprehensive feasibility study, which analyzed the practicality of expanding and operating the airport on a PPP basis. The IFC’s study showed hypothetical scenarios of the airport’s performance under both the public and private sectors. The sophistication of managerial and operational methods promised under the private sector’s construction and operation of the airport further encouraged GACA to pursue the PPP route. Furthermore, the results of the due diligence strategic report were equally promising. The airport was a bankable project due to the rising international traffic and growing demand from international airlines to land.

GACA’s optimism about the promises of higher quality and better services via the PPP route resonated well with the findings of wider academic research on PPPs for two reasons. First, while the academic literature has reported mixed results regarding how well and fast PPPs

deliver projects with the proclaimed value for money (McQuaid & Sherrer, 2010), it has consistently emphasized that PPPs successfully honor their promises of efficiency and value for money when the right projects that “have it in them” are selected for PPP (Koppenjan 2005, p. 149). The due diligence report conducted by IFC confirmed that the airport was a very strong business case for PPP. Second, Hussain and Siemiatycki (2018) found that when private money is involved in construction projects, the private sector tends to play a stronger oversight role with regard to how efficiently and diligently resources are used compared to when they use public money, striving to deliver the project on time to begin generating the revenues that only begin after the commercial operation of the project.

***Social integration as religious symbolism work***

The rigidity of the Saudi bureaucratic systems and lack of regulatory systems to support PPPs convinced the IFC head and GACA chairman that acquiring political power and support were the only means through which project implementation would be feasible. Those two actors then exercised a mode of episodic power that influenced and convinced the top political leadership, on an *exceptional basis*, to allow the use of a PPP model that promised better outcomes for the airport than the public procurement method. Information about which bases of systemic power were important to enable the project implementation are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Bases of systemic power and *how* it was accessed

<b>Individual/ organization holding power</b>	<b>Bases of systemic power</b>	<b>Importance of form of power for project’s success</b>	<b>Supportive arguments used to gain access to power</b>
<b>Ministry of Defense</b>	Royal/political	Providing access to higher levels of political and royal support necessary for project.	GACA sought endorsement and support of Ministry of Defense in its strategy of

			involving private sector in operating and developing airports.
<b>Prince of Medina</b>	Royal/ political/administrative	Providing political and royal support for coalition of actors advocating PPP project.	PPP project would enhance the quality of the airport and its service delivery/support job creation / enhance economic growth.
<b>Ministry of Finance</b>	Political/financial	Issuing financial guarantees for project/national carrier	PPP would mean free airport expansion /faster project delivery/bigger revenue stream/better operation.
<b>Supreme Economic Council/Council of Ministers</b>	Royal/political	Altering regulative forms of project delivery and bureaucratic controls to fit PPP project.	PPP would bring financial gains/linkage between religious tourism and job creation.
<b>The King</b>	Royal/religious/ political/cultural	Representing ultimate pinnacle of political, royal, and religious power over all institutions in country.	Part of religious and political duty of Kingdom is to facilitate Muslims' pilgrimage to the two holy mosques.

*Arguing that the project's religious significance required an immediate solution.* A large number of high-profile projects have in the past been excessively delayed or unfinished in Saudi Arabia, with several past PPP proposals for subway systems and trains never materializing (Shaw-Smith, 2011). However, the airport project had a unique religious status for actors who were approached to support it. As one senior legal consultant stated, "Medina Airport isn't for air transport, it's for *Hajj* infrastructure." The key message repeatedly emphasized by the IFC head and GACA chairman when resorting to their social and political networks to form a coalition of actors to advocate the project was the religious significance of the project. The airport, as a gateway to the city of Medina, necessitated immediate action to increase its capacity and enable larger numbers of Muslims to perform their pilgrimage. The IFC head took the initiative early on and approached the Prince of Medina to explain the benefits and opportunities of delivering the project through PPP. The Prince accepted the idea,



although no airport in Saudi had ever been financed, constructed, or operated by the private sector.

The proposal to expand the airport had been with the Council of Ministers since 2000 but its budget decision had yet to be completed, let alone the lengthy process of searching for qualified companies to deliver it.<sup>1</sup> As a member of the Saudi royal family with considerable political and administrative power and direct access to the King, the Prince's involvement from this early stage was critical. He endorsed the project and informally reached out to other ministers and high-level bureaucrats to advocate it as well. The chairman of GACA easily gained the support of the Minister of Defense for the project, since his organization operated under the umbrella of the Ministry and he was able to raise the topic at Ministerial meetings.

*Reaching out to political actors with a religious obligation to cater to pilgrims to the two holy mosques.* As a part of their effort to build consensus and support for the project, the chairman of GACA and other ministers brought the proposal to expand the airport on a PPP basis to meetings of the Council of Ministers and Supreme Economic Council, which are headed by the King. They all emphasized the duty of Saudi Arabia to facilitate Muslims' pilgrimage, and cited the due diligence report's findings that showed how expanding the airport and operating it on a PPP basis would increase the number of pilgrims from 3 million yearly in 2008, to 8 million immediately after its commercial operation, to 18 million by 2035, and up to 40 million in the third phase of expansion in 2050 (Sabq, 2015). The connection between the religious duty of the King to Muslims and Medina Airport is clear in his speech in 2006, which announced that, "...given the importance of Medina to the Islamic world and to the entire

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, it took 11 years for the project to be started. In October 2011, a consortium entered into a contract with the GACA to build and operate the Prince Muhammad Bin Abdulaziz International Airport in Al Madinah Al-Munawarah under a 25-year concession. In 2018 it had 8,144,790 passengers pass through and 60,665 aircraft movements (source: TAV Traffic Results)

world, I announce the transformation of Medina Airport into an international airport” (Al-Riyadh, 2006). As such, the religious factor was crucial in approaching the King to support the delivery of the airport through non-traditional means personally. Many interviewees stated that the connection between the religiosity of the airport and the political support given to it created a firm bedrock for embracing the PPP model.

*Demonstrating that religious tourism supports job creation and economic growth.* The head of IFC presented the PPP idea to the Minister of Finance and articulated its financial rewards, such as reducing the costs of expanding and operating the airport and expenses of employees, albeit with considerable financial guarantees to be borne by the ministry. The function of the airport as the gateway of the Hajj to the sacred sites of Islam meant that a flow of income was guaranteed, with the sharp increase in pilgrims each year being testament to that. The Minister of Finance supported the project and became an essential member of the coalition of actors who endorsed it, emphasizing its importance at the Council of Ministers and Supreme Economic Council meetings. The economic benefits of the project were highlighted, including drastically increased income flow through better management of landing slots and revenues. The increased volume of passengers that would be visiting the Medina and Mecca mosques would mean a massive increase in the city’s economic activities and job creation in the tourism-related industries that formed the backbone of those activities. A study evaluating the impact of expanding Medina Airport also showed that the city could potentially host one million visitors per month, with its revenues counting as the second-highest source of income for Saudi Arabia after oil revenues (Ouadou, 2000).

### *System integration work*

The GACA chairman and IFC head exercised episodic power to try and influence the thinking of key political actors and have them permit a foreign private company to operate the airport.

This was something that had never been done before in Saudi Arabia. The ultimate outcome of gaining the approval was the empowerment of the PPP project through several forms of power through episodic modes of power as well as social and system integration as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3: Forms of power and their impact on implementation of PPP project.

<b>Forms of power</b>	<b>Modes in which power operated</b>	<b>Effects of power on routinized ways of project delivery</b>
<b>The King's order</b>	System and social integration	Provided political legitimacy and urgency of delivering project through PPP.  Enforced responsiveness and adherence of all concerned actors and organizations in project implementation.
<b>Decree from Supreme Economic Council</b>	System integration	Exempted the PPP project from regulatory controls of GPTL and allowed use of BTO agreement instead.
<b>Decree from Council of Ministers</b>	System integration	Removed bureaucratic and administrative barriers blocking PPP project by issuing decree that required all concerned entities to issue exceptions to normalized ways of working.
<b>Financial guarantees from Ministry of Finance</b>	System integration	Made the project bankable and increased trust of lenders and investors in project.
<b>Support from Ministry of Defence</b>	System integration /episodic	Represented royal influence and power of Minister of Defense and provided letters of support whenever needed.
<b>Administrative Ruler of Medina</b>	System integration/ episodic	Issued orders to facilitate administrative work required for project implementation.
<b>Executive powers of Steering Committee</b>	System integration/ episodic	Oversaw the day-to-day requirements of project by holding weekly meetings and fully supporting work of project champion.  Removed the regulatory and bureaucratic obstacles facing project by issuing exceptions to them.

<b>GACA's president</b>	Episodic	Streamlined internal decision-making processes.  Endorsed private sector's requests to government entities.
<b>Professional power of project champion</b>	Episodic	Decentralized bureaucratic pressures, with power to act autonomously meaning effective and instant decision-making processes.  Led entire project implementation process.

*Exempting the PPP project from regulatory controls through ministerial decrees.* One key factor that facilitated access to the highest echelons of politics was the support of the Minister of Defense. The systemic power of the Ministry of Defense was manifest in its position as the most powerful Ministry in Saudi Arabia, with the Minister always one of the closest members of the royal family elected by the King (Kamrava, 2018, an important element of social integration. Since civil airports were, at that time, under the Ministry, other government entities could not dispute or otherwise oppose the Minister's support for the airport. The Minister also supported the project by writing letters to any government entities that required additional documents, the lack of which could risk complicating the implementation process. The personal touch of the Minister was an important element of social integration in smoothing the path for the airport. Similarly, the Ministry of Finance's support was a critical factor in the project's success because it assured system integration by issuing financial guarantees in excess of US \$1.5 billion and also assuming accountability in the event that the national airline might default on any of its payments, ensuring the project's bankability and making it attractive to the private sector.

The Council of Ministers and Supreme Economic Council were two very powerful entities that represented the tight nexus of social and system integration in the Kingdom. The concentration of episodic power capabilities vested there empowered the actors implementing the project. These councils comprised all of Saudi Arabia's Ministers and are chaired by the King. They

are *the* obligatory passage point for decision-making. They issued decrees requiring all government entities to collaborate with GAC. In addition, they issued all the necessary documents to finance the project through a private consortium. Finally, they transferred the airport to the private operator when construction was completed. As one senior bank representative explained, the decrees ordering implementation of the project was “an exceptional case because it was a non-government contract”. As such it by-passed all the routinized ways of writing construction contracts and delivering infrastructure projects. Such non-compliance with customary Saudi bureaucracy would have been impossible without the support of the system and social integration condensed in these important obligatory passage points.

The two councils empowering of the project resulted in the creation of a high-level Steering Committee chaired by the chairman of GACA and composed of eminent figures in the political and business sectors. Again, there was a fusion of system and social integration legitimating the Steering Committee because of the prestigious figures which it contained. The committee was created and empowered exclusively to make *any and all* decisions important to the project’s implementation. The committee held weekly meetings where project-related documents were signed, and letters of support provided to eliminate any bureaucratic or regulatory bottlenecks. The work of the committee was also backed up by the Prince of Medina, who issued orders to facilitate any project-related administrative procedures at the Medina governorate. He also ordered all relevant entities to expedite issuance of licenses or permits related to water, electricity, and other services supplied by the Medina municipality. Royal writ is the highest form of legitimacy any project could achieve. The Royal imprimatur assured the smooth passage of the project through the byzantine bureaucracies of the state.

*Establishing the urgency and political legitimacy of the project through a Royal Order.* The ultimate representation of social integration and dispositional power, in this case, was the issuance of a Royal Order. The Royal Order epitomized the political support enjoyed by the project as a high-level national priority that needed to be delivered urgently and legitimized the PPP form for its delivery. With a Royal Order, none would dare to be seen to impede the project. Although not directed to a specific organization or individual, the powers embedded in the Royal Order were implicit. Should there be cases of resistance against the project, the issuance of the order would achieve consent. The drastic changes necessarily affecting all routine ways of operating national airports and developing infrastructure that the project entailed would not be resisted. Any necessary change in the behavior of individuals and organizations affected by the project came from the highest source of legitimacy in the land and irrespective of how members of organizations might think about what acting in accord with the order entailed, no individual actor could be blamed for the actions they took. They were enacting the Sovereign's will. One senior government official explained that, "when a Royal Order is issued, nobody has the choice to resist or challenge it." The power of the Royal Order removed any regulatory or bureaucratic barriers even before they arose, a fact emphasized by all interviewees.

*Empowering the project champion to streamline the PPP project implementation process.* Most informants within GACA stated that their preparatory institutional work was focused on creating coherent internal organizational dynamics to streamline operations and decentralize decision-making. The PPP Team Leader, who was also leading the internal PPP unit in charge of the project's administrative duties was described by an IFC representative as "the oil in the gears making sure that things were happening and pushing government stakeholders to get things done."

The practical implications of the political and royal support for the project were visibly manifested in empowerment of the Team Leader, who acquired the *power to* make all important decisions and navigate all government agencies to gain the necessary approvals. He stated that, “PPP projects need one individual who has the power and guts to implement all projects and make good decisions.” With the Royal Order as a backstop, this was not too difficult to achieve. Although most Saudi bureaucratic organizations are characterized by rigid hierarchical processes, GACA’s chairman transferred a considerable capacity for making autonomous decisions to the PPP Team Leader and delegated many responsibilities to other senior members of the team to accelerate the decision-making process. These were innovations that severely challenged the business as usual of Saudi bureaucracy; without the social integrational elements of the project, it is likely that the project would have failed.

#### ***Work to Disempower agency of resisting actors***

The political empowerment of the PPP project, by enacting systemic *power over* the institutionalized form of project delivery, destabilized the status quo. It entailed a new project financing model, rigid project governance mechanisms that had hitherto not existed in the construction domain, a new procurement method as well as a drastic shift in status for government employees within the airport who were suddenly obliged be subordinate to a private employer. The effects of enforcing the PPP method on individual and organizational actors are summarized in Table 4 below, which also illustrates the repair work necessary to alleviate those effects.

*Opening the local market to foreign competitors as a disadvantage to local companies.* The monopoly of a few powerful Saudi business families over the construction industry had in the past institutionalized aa regime in which they were able to exercise dominance in the delivery of large infrastructure government contracts (House, 2013; Ali, 2010). The introduction of a

PPP model with private financing and strict due diligence mechanisms exercised by international banks and investors meant that the processes of project procurement would be drastically different. Given the sophisticated technical requirements of airport expansion and the high complexity of its operation and management of the tremendous number of pilgrims visiting Medina, it was evident that local private actors would be easily disqualified and lose ground to more advanced international companies. They could not rely on the traditional channels of patronage to deliver the contracts.



Table 4: Effects of systemic integration on individual and organizational actors

	<b>Impact of systemic integration on actors and organizations</b>	<b>New PPP project requirements which changed routine ways of operating</b>	<b>Repair work to alleviate the impact of systemic integration and implement the project</b>
<b>Local private sector actors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Local private construction companies lost the project to an international firm.</li> <li>-Local private actors' capacity to influence project award decision was eliminated.</li> <li>-Operation of the project was handed over to an international firm.</li> <li>-It was stipulated that the project would be awarded only to actors with the technical capacity to administer the projects' requirements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sophisticated expertise in constructing and operating complex airport projects.</li> <li>- High levels of efficiency in operating the airport over a 25-year period.</li> <li>- High levels of transparency in bidding for the project.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Establishing good project governance mechanisms:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Involving IFC during all stages of tendering, bidding, and awarding the project, which provided strong governance and transparency-related mechanisms.</li> <li>-Selecting only private actors with proven capacity to expand and operate the airport efficiently.</li> </ul>
<b>Bureaucratic and administrative actors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-All government departments were unfamiliar with the concept of PPP.</li> <li>-The new form of project organizing required different contractual and administrative measures that the Saudi bureaucracy did not have the capacity to administer.</li> <li>-Government departments could not make decisions that were not aligned with existing legal and regulatory frameworks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Familiarity with the PPP concept and implementation process.</li> <li>-Capacity to administer the legal and regulatory requirements for drafting the PPP contract.</li> <li>-Handover of the project to the private sector.</li> <li>-Understanding of the requirements of a successful partnership with the private sector.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Sensegiving:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Explaining the importance of the project for Muslims all over the world, and for the local economy.</li> <li>-Explaining that only this project would be implemented as a PPP, and no changes were required for the entire project implementation process.</li> <li>-Making public sector entities part of the project implementation process.</li> </ul> <p><b>Capacity building:</b></p>

-Handing the airport to a private operator that would decide the “rules of the game” led to frustration among government entities.

-Helping government entities to administer PPP contracts with the assistance of international consultants.

**Employees and management at the airport**

-Transforming the airport from a public entity into a private operator meant government employees had to resign as government employees and transfer as private employees.  
-Drastic changes in the administration and operation of the airport caused fear, confusion, loss, and resistance among employees who refused to join the new operator.

-Change of organizational identity and culture from public to private.  
-Signing of a new contract and abidance by a new rules and regulations working for a private sector company.  
-New sets of technical and administrative skills and higher expectations of performance, discipline, and attendance.  
-Loss of job security and working under three-year renewable contracts.  
-Longer working hours and fewer holidays.  
-Salary increases and promotions following strict measures that upset all employees.

**Identity work:**

-Adjusting government employees’ organizational identity from public to private.

**Sensegiving:**

Explaining to employees the benefits of change for individual employees’ careers and the country.  
-Explaining the importance of the PPP model for the increasing number of Muslims performing pilgrimages and for the economy.

**Persuasion:**

-Increasing salaries and introducing new benefits for employees agreeing to shift to the private employer.  
-Reminding employees of the religious gratification resulting from serving pilgrims to the holy mosques of Mecca and Medina.

**Capacity building:**

-Providing training to employees on the new organizational practices and equipment.

*Forcing the bureaucracy to administer the PPP leading to frustration and lack of capacity.*

The royal and administrative decrees to expand the airport and operate it through the private sector challenged standardized bureaucratic and administrative procedures. The most difficult challenge was shifting the bureaucratic mentality of delivering government projects through the traditional EPC method. The bureaucrats in control had the capacity to dictate contracts and set specific deliverables. The consortia led by a private operator flipped this assumption and set new rules of the game. There were no policies, procedures, templates, laws, regulations, or guidelines that government departments and line ministries could rely on to respond to the requirements of GACA and its teams' formalization of the documentation for the BTO agreement, while the political backing that the project enjoyed meant that these government entities could not reject the project or challenge its implementation. GACA had social and system integration wrapped up and under these conditions seemed able to configure all the circuits of power accordingly. It had, in terms of direction from above and managing upwards, achieved both system and social integration. Managing down was another matter.

*Operating the project via a private entity causing fear, confusion, and resistance among employees.* While it can be said that the institutional context of Saudi Arabia was the major problematic issue prior to signing the PPP contract, one senior government official explained that, after signing, it was the management and staff of the airport who became the “biggest challenge the project faced, since they refused to transfer to a private operator.” The transfer of the airport into the hands of a private operator had a dramatic impact on the management and employees of the airport. It meant a shift from being a public employer to one that was private. There was no evidence in the data to suggest that the employees and staff of the airport were a part of the change process from the outset or that they had been consulted or properly prepared for it prior to the contract signing. The change caused not only temporary loss of status a but also a permanent shift in their organizational identity and radical alteration of how

they performed their daily tasks. Different and increased expectations of performance prevailed, and new uncertainties arose.

Employees felt that terminating their contracts and employment as public sector workers threatened their job security. Although public sector jobs paid much less, what was crucial for the airport's management and staff was lifelong job security, longer holidays and familiarity with the relaxed government system. Their posts were, in effect, sinecures. In contrast, private sector jobs were more demanding and performance-based, and renewal of contracts every three years was predicated on meeting certain KPIs and competitive criteria. Furthermore, drastic changes would also be implemented in the form of rigid requirements concerning attendance and promotion, with new technical equipment being introduced to operate the airport. All of these changes required considerable skills that many employees did not have, which some of them were not prepared to invest time and effort to learn. The need for the changes was also unclear to many airport employees who demanded that they remain under the umbrella of GACA as government employees while working for the operator. Almost all interviewees stressed that the refusal of the airport's employees to transfer to the private operator was the "biggest challenge" the project faced, one that took considerable time.

Employees were given four options that did not alleviate their fears of abrupt organizational change taking place at the airport. They were to 1) transfer to the operator under a new contract and be subject to private employment law; 2) be seconded to the airport for three years and then begin a new contract; 3) look for a new job and transfer to any other airport in the Kingdom or 4), seek a new job with other government entities. Employees complained that the implementation of the project took two years, while they were given only one week to decide which option they would choose (Al-Sharq, 2012b). They did not find the private sector offers attractive and refused those options, writing letters expressing their contempt of the offers to

the King and human rights organizations and asking to keep their government contracts and benefits (Al-Sharq, 2012a). In absolutism, bureaucracy is really perceived as patrimonial and employees' resistance, based on dispositions enculturated in the past pattern of indulgence that their sinecures had enjoyed, stalled the project and caused delays in the commercial operation of the airport.

### ***Repair work***

Disempowerment of public, private, and administrative actors required *repair work* to alleviate the negative effects caused by the abrupt pressures of systemic integration work on them. In spite of their resistance, employees' choices were restricted, and they were obliged to transfer to the private operator. There were pecuniary advantages, but the expectations of the implicit effort bargain were radically different.

*Establishing good project governance and transparency mechanisms.* The involvement of IFC in the project offered a strong project-governance mechanism. Existing anticorruption arrangements and institutions had yet to win the trust of international investors well-versed in Saudi corrupt and patrimonial practices. According to one senior representative of an international organization, during the tendering process for the airport project, some local construction giants attempted "to push the envelope very hard because they wanted the project badly," but were unsuccessful. The envelopes being pushed were unlikely to have been purely metaphorical.

With the backing of its social and system integration GACA was enabled to empower IFC, build strong project governance principles, increase the project tendering process's transparency and ensure that only a bidder that met all of the technical requirements and that had an attractive financial proposal would win the project contract. GACA outflanked local

construction companies accustomed to exercising power to win projects one way or another, not always in transparent, ethical or scrupulous ways. The capacity to select a competent entity led to the choice of a private sector actor with extensive experience in constructing and operating airports.

*Maintaining dialogue, sensegiving, and a developing a partnership.* GACA's team worked to engage in effective communication and dialogue with private partners. At this stage, the number of actors increased significantly. The project's field included GACA's team, the IFC's team, representatives of local and international banks, insurance companies, prequalified bidders, plus a complex arrangement of technical, legal and financial consultants. A sense of partnership and dialogue was critical, as was transparency in presenting all data related to the financial, legal and technical components of the project. Hiring experienced international consultants overcame the lack of local expertise in administering PPP contracts. Something identified as a critical success factor by seven informants. The role of the consultants was essential not only due to the absence of customary legal, financial and technical mechanisms for such projects but also because they translated international best practices in designing PPP contracts for airports into Saudi Arabia. International investors were comfortable with international arrangements that were customized to fit the local culture and environment.

The legal consultants drafted standard contracts that were used in airports internationally and put into place a general framework to guide the BTO agreement, which served as the main governing mechanism for the partnership. The contract would be the key foundation of the partnership for 25 years, so it needed to be comprehensive and to satisfy both parties. A clear BTO contract was designed by the consultants in conformance with international standards and included clauses for issues such as international arbitration, which Saudi Arabia did not have the institutional capacity to arrange. The private sector was permitted the flexibility to design

the operational and managerial procedures and models with few restrictions to allow it to create innovative and efficient solutions. The involvement of a private partner that financed, constructed, managed, and operated a public entity as politically sensitive as an airport was not only unprecedented and contradictory to all existing laws and regulations but also risked loss of government control over that particular asset. Furthermore, the entire institutional ecosystem in Saudi Arabia was unaccustomed to having the private sector dictate rules of engagement. Normally, the public sector, the traditional purchaser of services, would set the rules and expectations to be met by the service providers.

The former chairman of GACA stated that their key strategy was “to keep all of the ministries and government entities that were influential in the project informed of everything that [they] did.” GACA did not base its strength on just on the official decrees that empowered it but also founded it on proper communications with all government stakeholders, explain to them the importance and utility of the project. More importantly, they showed that the exceptions granted to deliver the project would not affect the overall institutional arrangements of the country. Such sensegiving mechanism demonstrated the importance and uniqueness of the project to all public entities. The method proved fruitful. The decentralization of decision-making allowed the “project champion” to directly meet with government officials, sign necessary documents and enforce decisions. The project champion also filled in cracks in the bureaucratic system and ensured that things were moving smoothly for the project by making direct visits to government entities. He did not rely merely on correspondence, which would have slowed down the speed of the project but worked socially. The private partners played an instrumental role in this process as well. Although GACA’s team was on the front lines during negotiations with government entities, the private consortium was also equally flexible and supportive when they faced deadlocks.

*Readjusting organizational identity, persuasion, and capacity building.* The airport employees and staff did not have any other choice but to transfer to the private operator despite their resistance and dissatisfaction. They were subject to an unassailable episodic power. Despite the coercion mobilizing the employees transfer, the actual process of implementing the change was more benign. The former head of GACA's PPP unit said that they "did not engage in conflict with the employees" but instead motivated them to accept the change in operation of the airport by a private actor by emphasizing its benefits, particularly stressing that it would enable more Muslims to perform pilgrimages. The religious symbolism was not only persuasive and accorded with the vocabularies of motive of pious Muslims but also offered the comfort that they were working not just for the airport but for the praise of Allah.

A special committee was formed to listen and respond to employees' concerns, compensating those that wished to leave the organization and preparing those that had decided to stay for their new roles. The key factor ending the employees' resistance and facilitating their transfer to the private operator was that they would only transfer on a secondment basis for three years as government employees. During this period, they would either adjust to the new work environment or have ample time to find new jobs at other government entities. Workers would remain government employees with all of the accompanying benefits and job security but at the end of the three-year period they would need to decide whether to sign a new contract as private employees or resign. In addition to boosting morale, monetary incentives were also offered. Employee salaries were increased by 20%, housing allowances, health insurance and other benefits that had not existed within the old system were offered. Education and training of employees in the new organizational structures and practices were essential for their integration into the changing organizational identity and culture. One private sector informant noted that "a total of 630 training days were offered both on-site in Medina and in Istanbul" where TAV, the consortia, had its headquarters. These training programs, aimed at both the



technical and psychological readiness of employees, were able effectively to enhance preparation for the new roles and responsibilities.

After initiating a program for building employees' skills and motivation to accept change, the institutional work of GACA and its partners shifted toward the progressive introduction of new structures and systems that would complete the reconstruction of the airport's identity and organizational culture. Key structural changes included the introduction of both mechanical tools and human resource management techniques. The establishment of new operational and organizational structures meant the birth of a new airport with new international standards and notably higher performance. The change was drastic, affecting everything about the way the airport had been run under the old administration, ranging from the quality of ground and passenger services to the equipment adopted to maintain and service aircraft. The introduction of these new techniques was gradual, with on-site training being offered to ensure that new systems could be operated by the same employees.

New human resource practices were introduced, as well as strict KPIs that employees needed to achieve. To guarantee the efficiency of the workforce, a spirit of private sector dynamism was injected into the airport's management style that was a novel break from the past. New practices were introduced regarding attendance, promotion and contract renewal, which were now determined by performance and output. These mechanisms institutionalized the private sector practices of conforming to rigid achievement criteria and reaching specific outcomes and targets.

## **Discussion**

The central research question guiding this study was to examine the types of institutional work that individual actors performed to gain power to initiate new forms of project delivery and

how the resultant modes of power were employed to relax the controlling mechanisms of past institutional structures. By connecting the PPP literature with recent developments in neo-institutional theory, this research makes the following three contributions.

### ***Religious symbolism and projects***

The first contribution is that it broadens the scope of the *means* through which individual actors aim to “achieve particular institutional objectives” (Hempel, Lawrence & Tracy, 2017, p. 570). Scott (1987, p. 507) has noted that organizations are not merely technical systems governed by rational decision making, power dependencies, and their interaction but more importantly they carry “symbolic aspects.” The institutional work literature has ascribed particular importance to “symbolic work that uses symbols, including signs, identities and language” to affect an institutional order (Hempel, Lawrence & Tracy, 2017, p. 570). The breadth of these symbols is limited, however, to the use of language and narrative rhetoric (Zilber, 2007), identity and practice work (Gawer & Phillips, 2013; Jones & Massa, 2013), emotion work (Watson, 2008), or aesthetic work (Warhurst & Nickson, 2007). It is evident from the list of 15 types of institutional work developed by Phillips and Lawrence (2012) that scant attention has been paid to how religious beliefs shape or fuel the institutional work carried out to change organizations or institutions (See also Tracy, Phillips & Lounsbury, 2014). This is surprising, as religion plays a key role in institutional ordering at the societal level in the majority of societies, particularly those that adhere to Islamic doctrines.

The paper contributes to extending the institutional work conversation by proposing *religious symbolism work*, which denotes how actors manipulate the shared religious beliefs of an institutional field to influence the decision-making and behavior of political actors. The fundamental mechanism that the chairman of GACA and head of IFC used to instigate interest in the project was by emphasizing its *religiosity*. The case analysis shows that this legitimation

maneuver to convince high-ranking officials to support the project was welcomed because there was a common understanding among all actors that they were supporting a *religious cause*, rather than a mere construction project. In order to gain access to political power and overcome the structural barriers blocking the PPP model, the two actors devised strategies by which they associated their work with several religious symbols.

The urgency of delivering the project was associated with enabling the increasing number of Muslims wishing to perform pilgrimages. It associated the PPP model as central to achieving this religious duty in a speedy and efficient manner. The argument was particularly useful in convincing resisting employees that by supporting work enabling Muslims to perform their pilgrimage they could gain religious gratification. To corroborate this point, during a regular visit to the Medina Airport during the pilgrimage season, the Prince of Medina was cited as saying to immigration officers: “you are gaining considerable reward from God by serving pilgrims in a good manner” (News24, 2018). Unlike several infrastructure projects in Saudi Arabia, which were initially proposed as PPPs but never received the necessary high-level political backing, framing the airport project through its religious significance made it an exception and convinced all political actors involved in the decision-making that the PPP was the right method. Bathed in the ethos of this religious motive for social integration the project was approved in the ministerial council meetings and then received a Royal Order which portrayed the project as a national high-priority. The social integration was essential to the system integration that followed assent.

Approaching the King to support this infrastructure project personally was motivated by the fact that part of his duty to the global Muslim community is to support projects or decisions that facilitate the journey of Muslims to their two holy mosques. His personal involvement from the beginning until the inauguration of the project represented a powerful sign of its

importance and the need for the actors concerned to offer it support. The religious symbolic beliefs prevalent in the society were powerful symbols that individual actors used to build momentum for a new organizational model. Associating new forms of project organizing with a religious meaning accelerated the work needed to legitimize its urgency and relevance, persuading powerful actors to embrace and support it.

In a similar vein, this paper offers new insights into project management research. Although the use of symbols has been thoroughly examined in organizational studies, analysis of how associating symbolic meanings with mega-infrastructure projects contributes to their successful delivery is still limited (Soderlund et al., 2017). Existing studies have focused on how political symbols advance projects (Van Marrewijk, 2017). For example, Rego, Irigaray, and Chaves (2017) argue that the timing of constructing or completing three important historical mega-projects in Brazil was driven by the political and symbolic importance of events such as FIFA 2014, which played a critical role in finishing one of those projects on time. Similarly, van der Westhuizen (2017) provides a compelling analysis of how mega-projects as political symbols can be successfully implemented when they are closely associated with mythical discourses. The first high-speed train in South Africa gained the needed political support because the promoters of the project demonstrated the hosting the World Cup in South Africa depended upon the construction of that project. In an absolutist and Wahabi state such as Saudi Arabia there is no greater political support than the duty to Allah and to the Sovereign.

The findings of this paper advance such research by revealing that religious symbolism can be a powerful mechanism to drive megaprojects. The appealing factors in the project were not just its economic value and potential to create new jobs and expand the tourism industry of the city but also its role as an *enabler* that would allow millions of extra pilgrims to fulfil their religious obligations each year. The political elite's intimate involvement in the project reflects the

intricate links between religious beliefs and how they affect the cognitive realities of political actors, encouraging them to support project forms that did not fit existing institutional structures. The political actors supporting this project, such as the King, not only fulfilled their obligation to facilitate the journey of Muslims to the holy mosques but also sponsored spiritual gratification and enjoyment.

### ***Power and project enablement***

Second, by analyzing how circuits of power facilitated the PPP project implementation process, the research expands the discussion regarding the bases and the inter-dependence among several forms of power in organizational theory and project management. The discussion of power in organizational studies is predominantly concerned with how actors use power to shape the formulation of strategy. It is limited to how management exercises power to implement new strategic objectives (McCabe, 2009), how power circulates through discourse to shape the creation of new strategies (Hardy & Thomas, 2014), and the roles of episodic and systemic powers in radical organizational change (Lawrence, Malhotra & Morris, 2012). The power dynamics presented in this literature usually involve actors' private organizations embedded within market logics, revealing tactics used by actors in the upper levels of hierarchies to exercise episodic power and change certain aspects of the organizations.

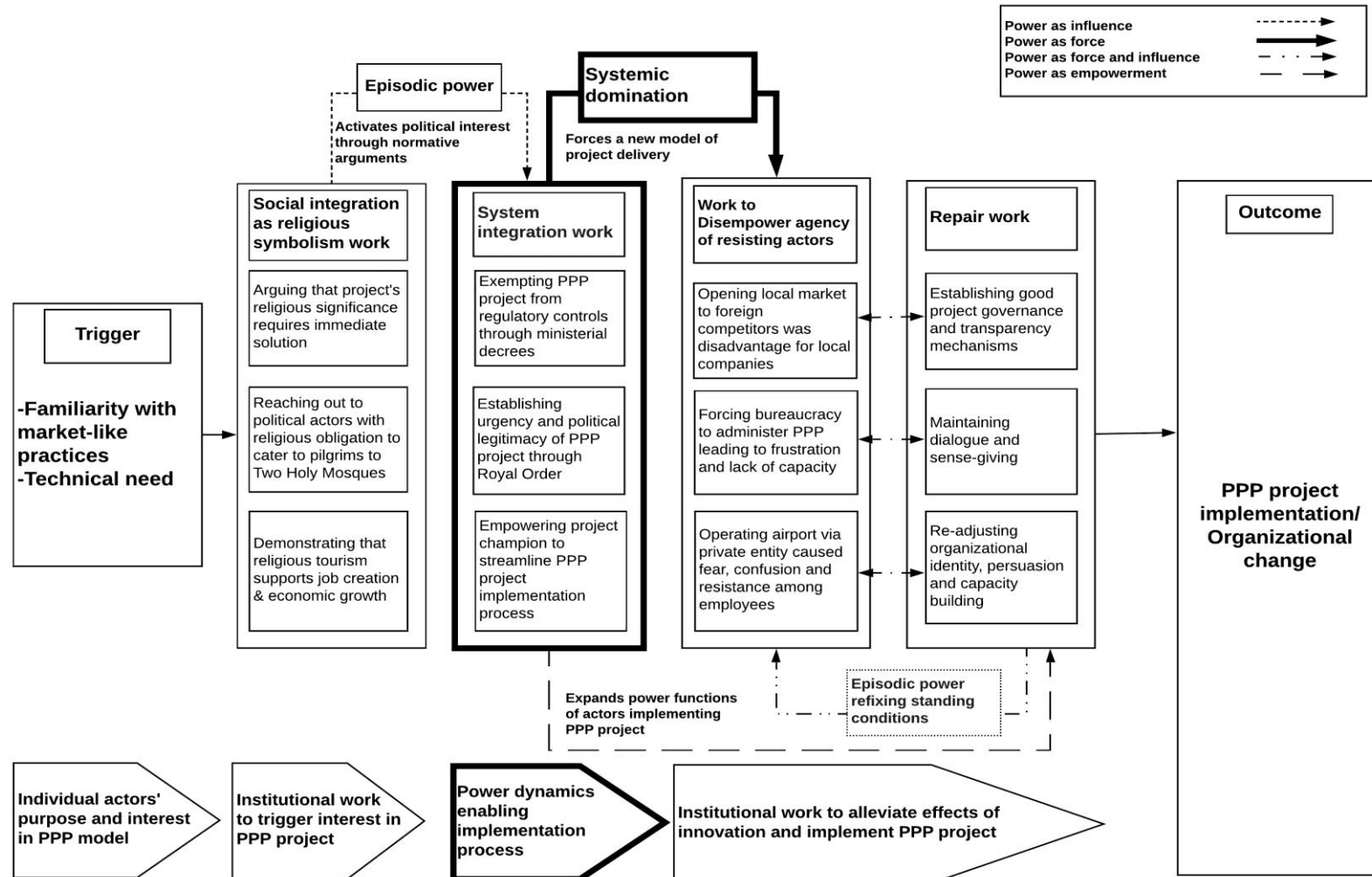
In the present paper, it is demonstrated that the arguments used to access systemic power go beyond market motives and include religious and spiritual causes that have not been addressed sufficiently in organization theory. The chairman of GACA and head of IFC sought to implement an innovative and novel form of project organizing obstructed by the constraining effects of the institutional structure. These two actors, however, realized that they needed to expand their power functions to *force* the PPP model over the bureaucracy, the local powerful construction firms and employees and management of the airport. Therefore, they developed

convincing arguments based on the normative *religious* reality shared by all actors in Saudi Arabia and associated fulfilling the dreams of Muslims to perform their pilgrimage with the use of the PPP model to expand and operate the airport. This strategy enabled them to reconstruct the social reality associated with the project in order to legitimize a new form of project delivery and facilitate access to the powers associated with both social and system integration embedded within the institutional structure.

The present research developed a process model that depicts how the episodic and systemic forms of power operated in a manner illustrating the effects of each mode of power. As demonstrated in Figure 2, the two actors emphasized the religiosity of Medina to build and develop their sources of power. Because they were attempting to convince elite political actors to legitimize the PPP model, their exercise of episodic power sought successfully to activate political interest and support for the PPP, manifested in two forms. The first was the empowerment of the PPP project through several ministerial decrees and a Royal Order that *forced* the implementation of the project, regardless of its severe repercussions on several organizational and individual actors, including private actors, the bureaucracy and airport employees. It was not a process that had institutional legitimacy in the Saudi context. By extending the empirical context to an absolutist state in which political power is top-down, this study addressed the call for research to demonstrate how power shapes organizational change (Lawrence et al., 2001; Lawrence, 2008). The use of social integration was critical in this case, since none of the actors affected would have voluntarily accepted the private sector logic, nor supported the institutional work required to implement the project in a non-traditional manner. The force of the religious ethic behind social integration disempowered resistant agency associated with the project, restricted their options, obliging acceptance of a new organizational reality that people were unaccustomed to. The project had unlimited authority and capacities bestowed on it by the congruence of social and system integration, despite being a radical and

creative destruction of accustomed ways of doing things in the Saudi bureaucracy, destruction that led to the necessity for repair work. Actors leading the *repair work*, such as the PPP Team Leader, were enabled to exercise episodic power to undermine any institutional hindrances blocking the PPP project. At the same time, episodic power in the form of influence characterized repair work through such strategies as sensegiving and persuasion to mitigate the resistance of affected actors and to convince them to accept the new organizational reality, using the rhetoric supplied through the social integration of religious symbolism to do so.

Figure 2: Process model displaying institutional work and power dynamics involved in PPP project implementation





System power is typically seen as embedded within social, cultural, bureaucratic and technological forms (Clegg, 1989; Lawrence et al., 2001). In this research, systemic power is premised not only on the system integration afforded by GACC but also the social integration encompassing the symbolic interconnectedness of religious with royal, political and administrative bases. In this empirical context, the motivation to achieve religious gratification by supporting Muslims in their pilgrimage is due to the impact of religion as a power for social integration that is invisible in its causal workings but deeply affects decision-making processes. Connected to this is the symbolic capital of the King and other members of the royal family who occupy key roles in the government, such as Minister of Defense. While their power is systemic it is also embedded in the religious and absolutist codes of the social and cultural reality of the country that are taken-for-granted everywhere. These royal actors often used their system positions to exercise episodic power also, as for instance by issuing decrees, writing letters of support, or (in)formally directing other members of the government or administration to support the project in some way.

Third and finally, by extending Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) typology of institutional work to a PPP project located in an adverse institutional environment, this paper made an analytical shift from the meso to the micro level. Doing so allowed the research to capture the "invisible efforts" of individual actors which are currently overlooked in the PPP and project management literatures, as well as how a stable equilibrium between agency and structure was achieved. While previous research has adopted a top-down approach and shown that PPP-enabling organizational fields are critical drivers of PPP implementation (Jooste & Scott, 2012b; Verhoest et al., 2015; van den Hurk & Verhoest, 2015; Mahalingam & Delhi, 2012; Matos-Castaño et al., 2014), this research adopted a bottom-up approach that uncovered institutional workers' strategic use of power to create a successful story of drastic organizational change. Undermining the forces of structure required the "knowledgeable, creative and practical work"

of actors who disrupted the operational model of public organization by acquiring and utilizing several forms of power (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 219). In the present case study, the actors leading this change effort understood the influence of political power and how to mobilize the social integrational power of religious symbolism to force a change that was radical for its context.

Despite the utility of sensemaking and sensegiving activities (Clegg et al., 2017; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maguire et al., 2004) in the project management literature, such concepts have not received sufficient attention in the PPP literature. In the present study, actors used several forms of negotiation and bargaining to work toward creating enabling mechanisms for the PPP project based on the innate characteristics of their existing structures. Sensemaking formed an essential part of the preliminary internal institutional work to identify what would be necessary support for the PPP project. Sensemaking processes are ongoing and retrospective (Clegg et al., 2017), enabling institutional actors at GACA to revisit their strategies as the complexity of the project's implementation and the challenges being faced increased. Rather than rely on rationalities embedded in the system rationalities of their previous PPP experiences they harnessed the symbols embedded in religion's obligatory role in social integration in the Kingdom. Religion provided sensegiving instrumental for gaining the support of the airport's employees when contesting the signing of the PPP contract. Institutional work focused less on managing the resistance of employees and more on creating incentives and positively shaping a path for change in ways that reduced the psychological threat and uncertainty of change. For the numerous organizations making up the broader institutional structure, explaining that the project did not threaten existing public sector rules and regulations but merely established temporary institutional mechanisms to deliver the project through exceptions was important. The combination of exceptional systematicity and routine religiosity proved potent.

## Conclusion

The interplay and tight connection of social and system integration through the symbolic capital of religious and royal/political interconnectedness is not documented in organizational studies in the western context. The demarcation between church and state and the boundaries between politics and administration are in most cases well-established in these countries. The Muslim world is different, a difference that has a significant effect on managing and organization, as this study demonstrates, even when the forms of organization that are being implemented have developed in this western context, as did PPP. In the absence of clearly defined institutional fields of church, state, business and civil society it is necessary to broaden the conceptualization of the power of system integration from organizations into environments in which heads of state and political actors play significant roles and all are underpinned as manifestations of power by religious beliefs that make social integration cohere quite overtly.

Despite the crucial role of power relations in mega-projects, Clegg and Kreiner (2013) have noted that power remains a rare subject in project management research. When power is discussed in this field, it is often depicted as a “dirty word” (Clegg et al., 2017, p. 7), or a negative force that obstructs projects. This paper is situated among the few studies that discuss how power dynamics shape projects and demonstrate innovative ways in which power can be a positive force that drives the project implementation process forward. The findings are similar to those of Walker and Newcome (2000), who found that several individual actors built on their organizational power to successfully drive the development of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. They emphasized the power of external and internal coalitions such as the Jockey Club and the Planning Committee that collectively exercised organizational power to in order to push the project forward while the role of the government was passive.

Similarly, Liu et al., (2003) have argued that power in projects is represented in both interpersonal and organizational structural forms.

In the present case study, the Steering Committee and IFC played critical roles as an external coalition driving the project forward but they were empowered by the government and its key political actors who afforded system integration. The empowerment of actors leading the project provided them with *power over* the existing structure and gave the PPP Team Leader *power to* navigate the system and subdue any negative forces that might obstruct the project implementation. The power of the King in the context of this study flowed through the circuit of social integration and was essentially dispositional, largely a role of sponsorship acting as a major incentive for others to support the project. Nonetheless, the usefulness of the Steering Committee would not have been so great had not the PPP Team Leader exhibited the entrepreneurial skills required to solve problems as they emerged. The episodic power of the PPP Team Leader and his personal traits contributed to the success of the project implementation process in many significant ways.

The findings of this study also show that the work carried out to implement the PPP project was successful because the efforts and intentions of institutional work was aimed at *disrupting* the existing organizational model of the airport while simultaneously seeking to *maintain* its overarching institutional context. Because the Saudi bureaucratic system is run by royal princes who control policy-making and often steer it in directions that serve their own agendas (Common, 2013; Kamrava, 2018), the institutional workers did not attempt the “mission: impossible” of challenging this status quo. Instead, they worked with the grain of the existing structures of elite power with strategies designed to gain the exceptions necessary to change the organizational model of the airport. While doing so they kept the existing environmental and external institutional arrangements *intact*. Since this change was enabled through

legislative and administrative exceptions, the PPP experiment itself remains, so far, the *only* exception within the context of the Saudi transportation sector.

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