

ATMOSPHERE OF TRIADIC PUBLIC–PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

As public procurements are increasingly centralized, the purpose of this study is to shed light on the public procurement practices, conducted through the intermediary, and consequently to understand the effects of tri-partite interaction on public procurement. Qualitative case study is conducted to propose that even though the involvement of the third party complicates public procurement, it is critical. The third party is perceived to act as the intermediary that provides expertise and support throughout the public procurement process and helps therefore to establish closer partnerships between the public and private sector. Thus, this study helps both public and private sector actors that seek to develop their partnership and improve public procurement practices.

Keywords: relationship atmosphere, triadic approach, public–private partnership, public procurement

INTRODUCTION

The interest of scholars and practitioners for public–private partnerships (PPPs) is apparent. This attention rises from the substantial intricacy of public procurement that provokes for closer interaction of public and private sector (Erridge & McIlroy 2002; Rees & Gardner 2003; Lian & Laing 2004; Bovaird 2006; Thomson & Perry 2006). Thus, closer relationships between the public and private sector are developed to increase access to novel resources, reduce transaction costs, clarify RFQs or provisions, reduce risks and accelerate co-operative actions (Erridge & Greer 2002). As public procurements are strictly constrained to protect effective and fair trade, these relationships are nonetheless developed within the competitive framework (Erridge & McIlroy 2002), which tends to create problems to establish and sustain interaction (Schotanus et al. 2011).

Public–private partnerships (e.g. Savas 2000; Essig & Batran 2005; Hodge & Greve 2007), their forms (e.g. Erridge & McIlroy 2002; Bovaird 2006, McGuire 2006; Edler & Georghiou 2007) and the effect they have on public procurement (e.g. Wang & Bunn 2004; Lawther & Martin 2005) have attracted scholarly interest. Altogether, these partnerships are represented either as relationships of two (Erridge & Greer 2002; Erridge & McIlroy 2002; Rees & Gardner 2003; Bovaird 2006) or several actors (Erridge & McIlroy 2002; Lawther & Martin 2005; Bovaird 2006), established to attain reciprocal, societal results (Skelcher 2005, 347). As public procurements are though increasingly centralized (Karjalainen 2011), the nature of public–private partnerships has changed into triadic. In centralized public procurement, that is, three parties have direct contacts (see Havila, Johanson & Thilenius 2004) as professional purchaser acts as the intermediary between the supplier and the public sector customer.

The purpose of this study is thus to shed light on the public procurement practices, conducted through the intermediary, and consequently to understand the effects of tri-partite interaction on public procurement. This is addressed through the construct of relationship atmosphere that is both the product and contributor of relationship (Håkansson 1982), but which has not been explored in triadic setting even though relationships of three actors are divergent from dyadic relations (Holma 2010).

This study is structured as follows. First PPPs are discussed from triadic perspective. Then the relationship atmosphere of triadic public–private partnership is reviewed to represent the theoretical framework of this study. Thereafter the research methods and consequent analysis are provided. The research results, restrictions and future research propositions conclude the study.

TRIADIC APPROACH TO PUBLIC–PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

In triads, three actors are seen to interact successively to achieve particular results (Thibaut & Kelley 1959; Madhavan, Gnyawali & He 2004). In literature, triads are used as an analytical tool to deconstruct nets into triads and explore the connections between the actors or relationships (Ritter 2000) or as a research perspective that focuses on triad itself (Havila et al. 2004). In particular, triads are recognized to exist between purchaser and two suppliers (e.g. Madhavan et al. 2004; Dubois & Fredriksson 2008), supplier and two purchasers (e.g. Choi & Kim 2008) and actors of network (e.g. Anderson, Håkansson & Johanson 1994). At length, triads are used to describe service triads (e.g. Gutek, Groth & Cherry 2002; Li & Choi 2009; van der Valk & van Iwaarden 2011), third-party logistics (e.g. Hertz & Alfredsson

2003; Gadde & Hulthén 2009) and other contexts that involve intermediaries (e.g. Havila et al. 2004; Madhavan et al. 2004).

The characteristics of triadic relationship result from its intricate structure. In triads, that is, interaction is highly interlinked as the three parties have direct connections (Caplow 1956; Havila et al. 2004). Havila et al. 2004 represent that if A interacts with B, this restricts the possibilities of A to have simultaneous interaction with C. Therefore, triads are never stable, nor is the dependency of actors apparent (Guttek et al. 2002; Holma 2010). Instead, there is a high potential for internal coalitions that affect the balance of triad (Caplow 1956). This is reliant on the role of the third party that tends to alternate (Holma 2010).

Public procurements are increasingly conducted through professional purchasers. This rises from the centralization of public procurement (Karjalainen 2011), resulted from increased attention to strategic procurement (Padovani & Young 2008) and contract practices that are seen as tools to improve the efficiency of public procurement and serve the public interest. In particular, as public procurement requires higher expertise on public procurement policies and regulations, non-professional purchasers face problems to conduct these activities. Thus, the intermediary – professional purchaser – is required to construct concerted contracts and skeleton agreements for public organizations and support their statutory tasks provided for society. As this rests on the interaction of three parties, the relationship atmosphere of triadic public-private partnership is reviewed next to understand the effects of tri-partite interaction on public procurement.

ATMOSPHERE OF TRIADIC PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP

The interaction between the three parties is central as it results and contributes to relationship atmosphere (see Håkansson 1982). This atmosphere refers to the construct that describes the interpretations the parties have related to their relationship (Hallén & Sandström 1988) and the actors involved tend to perceive the relationship differently (Wilson 1995). Håkansson (1982) has proposed the relationship atmosphere to include factors as co-operation, power-dependence relationship, closeness and trust between the parties and reciprocal expectations. Nevertheless, as expectations are regarded as constitutive, but not separate factor to establish the relationship atmosphere (Hallén & Sandström 1988), they are not covered separately.

Relationships consist of co-operation. This relates to the actions taken by relationship parties to achieve shared results (Anderson & Narus 1990) and the extent of co-ordination between the partners (Metcalf, Frear & Krishnan 1992). This is necessary as co-operative attitude is found to help parties to understand and solve problems that their partners confront (Hallén & Sandström 1988). In public-private partnerships, the explicit co-ordination of responsibilities is particularly stressed (Holma, Björk & Virtanen 2009) as it facilitates knowledge exchange (Bovaird 2006).

As social constructions, relationships include ties of dependence that reflect parties' relative power (Emerson 1962; Hallén, Johanson & Seyed-Mohamed 1991; Wilson 1995). That is, as the power relates to the ability to affect relationship partner (Håkansson 1982), it exists to the degree the other party is dependent on the resources of its partner (Hallén et al. 1991). In centralized public procurement, the power of the public sector is secured through policies that increase the quantity of alternatives and through broader contracts, highly eligible from suppliers' perspective. In triadic partnerships, the power-dependence relationship is trickier if coalitions of two actors are used to enforce the third party to act upon their requests (Holma

2010). Triads are therefore rarely balanced related to the power or dependence (Guttek et al. 2002) even though interdependence is seen to facilitate triadic relations (Holma et al. 2009).

In the relationship, the parties hold interpretations on the degree of their cultural and social distance (Hallén & Sandström 1988). In public–private partnerships, particularly the cultural distance between the sectors is apparent (see Rainey, Backoff & Levine 1976; Rainey & Bozeman 2000; Purchase, Goh & Dooley 2009; Arlbjørn & Freytag 2012). For instance, as the private sector purchases to increase revenues or decrease costs, the public sector procures to support services served for society (Wang & Bunn 2004). The readiness of the other party to consider the events from its partner's perspective is nonetheless recognized to increase the closeness between the relationship partners (Hallén & Sandström 1988). In triadic public–private partnerships, the third party should hence pursue to understand the conditions of the other two parties and increase their social closeness.

The trust contributes to the relationship atmosphere through the beliefs of relationship parties that their partner acts on their best interest (Wilson 1995). Havila et al. (2004) suggest that social interaction between the two parties has effects on triadic trust. That is, triadic trust is a construct that depends on the parties' reciprocal perceptions (Svensson 2004). The interaction between the professional purchaser and the supplier is thus proposed to affect the relationship of supplier and public sector customer. This is important as public–private partnerships tend to consist of initial mistrust, resulted from their cultural distance (Rees & Gardner 2003) that hinders the opportunity of developing long-term relationships (Erridge & Greer 2002). This long-term aspect (Hallén & Sandström 1988) relates to the desire of the parties to continue the relationship (Wilson 1995). In the public sector, as suppliers are regularly invited to tender, relationships between the sectors tend to lack relational continuity and the resources the parties devote for the partnership is rather scarce (Holma et al. 2009).

RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative approach is applied to understand the effects of tri-partite interaction on public procurement as it provides rich descriptions of explored events (Stake 1995, 47). Further, as case study method helps describe social behavior of individuals involved inter-organizational relationships (Halinen & Törnroos 2005), it is used to explore public–private partnerships.

The study focuses on triadic PPPs that exist between the centralized public procurement unit – the intermediary that procures as per EU regulations to support the statutory tasks of public organizations – the supplier and the public sector customer. At length, six thematic interviews are conducted for two private suppliers, *Aava* and *Vaara* that operate in the food industry, the centralized public procurement unit, *Konttori*, and two public sector customers, *Hoiva* from hospital and *Serviisi* from food service contexts (see Table 1).

Table 1. The primary data of the study.

Organization	Type of data and informant	Reason for informant(s)	Occasion & duration
Centralized public procurement unit <i>Konttori</i>	<i>Group interview</i> Service Manager & Procurement Specialist	Responsibilities relate public procurement of food services	12.10.2012, 1 hour
Public organization <i>Serviisi</i>	<i>Interview</i> Procurement Secretary	Purchaser's perspective and responsibilities relate public procurement of food services	21.11.2012, 40 minutes
Public organization <i>Hoiva</i>	<i>Interview</i> Area Manager	Purchaser's perspective and responsibilities relate food services	27.6.2013, 50 minutes
Potential supplier <i>Vaara</i>	<i>Group interview</i> KAMs (2)	Responsibilities relate public procurement	3.9.2012, 1 hour
Contract supplier <i>Aava</i>	<i>Interview</i> Sales Manager	Responsibilities relate sales	30.10.2012, 45 minutes
Contract supplier <i>Aava</i>	<i>Interview</i> Food Service Specialist	Responsibilities relate public procurement	5.11.2012, 40 minutes

These interviews are supported and triangulated (see Denzin 1978) by secondary data that consists of five site visits to the premises of supplier to brain storm potential research themes, actors' web pages to search for their operations and both the thematic interview of specialist and relevant newspaper articles to understand the selected food industry context. Ten reports, as request for quotation and the report of procurement decision, procurement regulations (EU directive 2004 / 17 / EC) and three public sector related lectures and seminars, provided by EU public procurement professionals, are used to understand EU policies and the cooperative side of them. In future, interviews and reports are gathered from the public procurement of health service.

This study is abductive by nature (Dubois & Gadde 2002) as the interaction of theory and practical observations develop the research subject. In practice, the interviews related to the food industry has steered the study to its tentative direction, thereafter theoretically reviewed and empirically revised. In future, the research results are contrasted to the context of health service procurement. At present, the analysis part rests on themes (see Miles & Huberman 1994) that emerged from the theory: (1) the state of co-operation, (2) the power–dependence relationship and (3) closeness, (4) trust and (5) commitment between the three parties. These

themes are analyzed from triadic perspective to understand the effects of tri-partite interaction on public procurement.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

This analysis focuses on the relationship atmosphere of triadic public–private partnership. At length, the characteristics of triadic relationship atmosphere are represented and their effect on public procurement provided.

State of co-operation

The actors from interviewed public organizations described that their co-operation with food suppliers is formal and scarce, but successful. The good experiences of the public sector from other relationships established though expectations to develop further their co-operation with food suppliers. In practice, they contrasted their present co-operation with food suppliers to other industries.

In this context, the co-operation is scarce, which in other industries is rather active...
(Procurement Secretary, Serviisi)

For instance, the procurement secretary of Serviisi stressed their interest and need to test, develop and tailor recipes for their kitchens together with the representatives of supplier as they are not alert to the product attributes or how they act on divergent situations. That is, public sector actors did not see regulative instructions to invite suppliers to tender as an opposite for closer co-operation and partnerships between the sectors. Instead, particularly the actors of the centralized public procurement unit, Konttori, highlighted partnerships that rest on negotiations.

Of course the interest is to proceed towards... closer partnerships. The purpose is not to dictate. Instead, if supplier notices things that need to be improved, discussions are then held. (Procurement Specialist, Konttori)

These partnerships are based on the regulative architrave of EU public procurement policies and regulations (see EU directive 2004 / 17 / EC). The excerpts reveal that the partnerships between the public and private sector are twofold as the supplier needs to interact with both the public procurement unit – the intermediary – and the public sector customer.

There are two types of co-operation: the co-operation of supplier with customers, those kitchens or nutritional services, and then this co-operation with us, the public procurement unit. (Service Manager, Konttori)

In this type of triadic relationship, the responsibility areas of the three parties are clearly and explicitly set and the actors are recognized to interact for distinct type of reasons. The role of the public procurement unit is at root to produce concerted contracts and skeleton agreements for public organizations as public procurement requires increasingly top-notch expertise. The public procurement unit is thus responsible for pre-contract negotiations, held for potential suppliers that facilitate the dialog between the public and private sector and help prepare prospective RFQs. These negotiations are supported by the group of public sector customers that provide their knowledge on divergent types of user needs.

I prepare RFQs, assess propositions, render decisions and draft contracts... For that a team is brought together that acts as a substance expert. (Procurement Specialist, Konttori)

Everybody brings their expertise to the table from their own perspective... The criteria and requirements that the users have are thought through. (Procurement Secretary, Serviisi)

As individual public organizations as schools and hospitals have divergent types of users that have distinct types of needs, centralized public procurement activities are intricate to put into practice. Further, concerted contracts or skeleton agreements are heavy and their preparation requires lot of effort from public procurement unit.

The amount of public organizations that the public procurement unit serves is broad and diverse. For instance, schools have distinct types of needs... Then hospitals have divergent type of needs too. So in order to invite suppliers to tender... It requires lot of effort. (Procurement Specialist, Konttori)

In the course of the contract, the role of the public procurement unit alters to supervision as then their principal task is to keep track contract enforcement. Thus, as the contract starts, the interaction between the three actors transfer from centralized to operational level. That is, the interaction between the public procurement unit and the supplier reduces, but it is heavily coordinated through rigorous contracts that set instructions how often procurement specialists should meet to share information on orders statistics and if required develop processes and solve substantial controversial situations. These rules are nevertheless bent if neither party sees meetings as necessary.

It is put into the contract provisions that reporting occurs at intervals of three months but if neither party sees it necessary... Discussions are then held to see whether it is necessary to meet or not. (Procurement Specialist, Konttori)

The expectations for co-operation are clearly stated. For instance, meetings are held regularly. (Food Service Specialist, Aava)

As for the interaction between the supplier and the public sector customer, it is more frequent as the sales representatives of supplier and the actors of public organizations interact daily to conduct the product exchange, solve notices of defects and provide information on product updates.

Altogether, centralization tends to complicate public procurement as concerted contracts and skeleton agreements are intricate to prepare as distinct type of user needs and the explicit coordination of responsibilities require attention. Though, the involvement of the third party – professional purchaser – is critical as it acts as the intermediary that provides its procurement expertise for contract negotiations and general support for contract enforcement.

Power–dependence relationship

In the food industry context, the public sector actors are seen to control the supplier together. This is evident as the centralized public procurement unit organizes meetings to consult the group of public sector customers to discover their needs and prepare prospective RFQs. That is, the public sector actors could use their internal coalition to set rather freely the conditions that potential supplier needs to meet to have the contract.

This type of power relationship is recognized to exist for three reasons. First, as the public sector is bounded to act on their procurement policies and regulations that stress fair trade, this tends to secure the quantity of alternative propositions. At length, particular types of procedures are used and RFQ provisions outlined so that suppliers have fair opportunity to offer their products. This is increased further through pre-contract negotiations between the public procurement unit and potential suppliers as they help revise tentative RFQ provisions and assist suppliers to improve their propositions. Further, it increases the competition and negotiation power of the public sector.

That sort of consultation is conducted so that potential suppliers are treated equally... Nobody is discriminated or favored. (Procurement Secretary, Serviisi)

The more the public sector receives versatile propositions from suppliers, the better it is for competition. That is always our interest. (Service Manager, Konttori)

Second, as public sector contracts are essential, resulted from centralized public procurement practices, this increases the bargaining power of the public sector. The interviewed suppliers described the public sector to provide substantial, relatively stable sales and the coverage that boosts sales at other markets and consequently they are interested to keep public sector actors as their client. In practice, the competition in the food industry is seen as intense as refrains on procurement decisions are typical.

If you lose the contract, the possible defaults are searched for. It feels that they truly look for the parts that could be interpreted differently. (Procurement Secretary, Serviisi)

Third, the power of the public sector is increased through the public sector practice to invite potential suppliers regularly to tender. In the public sector, the contract partners are replaced from time to time even though it is not straightforward task or it generates extra costs. For instance, the resistance to change is perceived as strong if supplier is changed as individuals develop closer bonds through day-to-day routines required to conduct the exchange.

The resistance of change that emerges from the field is strong. They are so used to the drivers that visit them that complaints emerge from the operational level. (Sales Manager, Aava)

It is dramatic. It is a sad situation... but this is life. (Area Manager, Hoiva)

The dependence of supplier is not though that perceptible if the purpose of the public sector is not to dictate, nor order the supplier. The interviewed actors from public procurement unit desired for instance to negotiate and solve together how required results are achieved. The co-operative attitude of the public procurement unit is stressed further as the excerpts reveal the actions taken to prepare RFQ to affect the rest of the public procurement process.

You do not have to depart from the contract. They have determined at RFQ what is expected. (Sales Manager, Aava)

To conclude, the involvement of the third party affects public procurement as it increases the negotiation power of the public sector. Nevertheless, as contract negotiations direct the public procurement process, the co-operative attitude of the third party is needed to dispel unbalanced power-dependence relationship that exists between the public and private sector.

Closeness between the parties

The cultural and social distances are noticed to exist between the public and private sector. In particular, the cultural distance results from public procurement policies and regulations, set to assure the probity of procurement activities, as they establish risk avoidant behavior. As these regulations are often understood to prohibit interaction, the procurement secretary of Serviisi concludes the public sector to be afraid to interact, particularly prior to RFQ release, as they are scared of the situation that they could favor subconsciously a particular supplier.

They might be scared of a situation that they favor. People that are not used to negotiate are scared. (Procurement Secretary, Serviisi)

As this type of culture affects the interaction level between the public and private sector, the cultural differences are perceived to establish social distance. This reflects the importance of social interaction. At length, the interviewees stressed closer social relationships to facilitate reciprocal discussions and reduce their threshold to contact the partner.

Of course, it is always easier to contact the person that you already know. (Procurement Specialist, Aava)

The interviewees represented pre-contract negotiations to reduce cultural and social distance as they are reciprocal discussions on technical issues and parties' expectations for RFQ. That is, they provide possibilities for suppliers to affect and suggest changes for prospective RFQs. The key accounts of Vaara felt for instance negotiations to help discover factors essential for customer and to secure that requested provisions are reasonable and feasible for them. These types of negotiations are particularly important as after RFQ release the actors need to keep their interaction formal to reduce the potential effects of their social closeness. This stresses the role of the public procurement unit as they hold the pre-contract negotiations, conducted to found solutions that satisfy the needs of both sectors.

Then their needs and our needs confronted. That generated good results. (Service Manager, Konttori)

Altogether, the cultural and social distance between the public and private sector is apparent. Hence, the role of the third party is to understand the conditions of the other two parties and develop their closeness as it facilitates negotiations and other joint activities.

Trust between the parties

The interviewed actors described their co-operation as good, which reflected their trust to the partner. Moreover, the trust is associated to the degree of closeness between the parties. That is, it develops as parties interact and establish closer social relationships.

The co-operation is great. Of course, it has lasted for years... They know our needs and hopes. (Procurement Secretary, Serviisi)

The excerpts reveal the relevance of partners' actions to trust development as it rests on how actors act or conduct their tasks and responsibilities.

I have received good feedback. We are trustworthy and we act according to the contract (Area Manager, Hoiva)

I think our co-operation is dynamic. It works. It is rather clear. Of course it depends on how you perform. You can do things either good or bad. (Sales Manager, Aava)

This uncovers the importance of explicit determination of responsibilities and consequently the role of the third party that negotiates the contract. In practice, the interviewees described contract partners to have clear routines to enforce the contract, which is supervised and at need interfered by the centralized public procurement unit. That is, the public procurement unit helps settle bigger conflicts that might affect the trust between the supplier and public sector customer.

Of course, the notices of defects that rise at the operational level do not require respond from us. Then if something bigger emerges, dialog is held. (Procurement Specialist, Konttori)

To conclude, the trust is founded on the actions taken by the partners during the contract and the third party is seen to support trust development through the explicit determination and co-ordination of responsibilities.

Commitment

The excerpts reveal that the three actors need to bind themselves to the procurement process as public sector contracts tend to last from two to five years. Further, formal contracts reflect the parties' readiness to carry out their responsibilities during the agreement period.

It always affects that these RFQs are intended for the future... You need to be a fortune teller to know the price for the future, but then these contracts are pretty good for us. (Sales Manager, Aava)

This requires adaptations particularly from supplier side as they need to adjust their processes for instance for the order system of the public sector or found other solutions to consolidate the divergent needs of public organizations. Though, the key accounts of Vaara represented that the public sector might need to change their expectations too if they are not feasible and the supplier has difficulties to deliver them.

The excerpts reveal that the co-operation between the sectors is not restricted to the contract. The interviewees concurred that even though activities are not that active outside the contract, individual level interaction might exist.

It is not as tight as with the contract supplier. Of course, it is remote, but potential suppliers should not be forgotten either... You need to keep track on what happens in the market. (Area Manager, Hoiva)

The suppliers felt interaction to help sustain the relationship and they visited the public sector for social reasons. As for the public sector actors, they preferred to concentrate on knowledge exchange. This is nonetheless founded on the personal relationships between the individuals as social closeness reduces the threshold to contact the partner.

Therefore, the need of the three actors to bind themselves to public-private partnership is not restricted to the contract as cooperative interaction at divergent types of relationship stages is beneficial. Further, this type of commitment results from the feeling of closeness and the trust between the parties and it is facilitated by the third party.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the theories of public–private partnerships and IMP as it focused on the public procurement practices, conducted through the intermediary, and consequently the effects of tri-partite interaction on public procurement. In particular, it reviewed the construct of relationship atmosphere (e.g. Håkansson 1982) in triadic setting. Thus, it is proposed that as triads are recognized to have particular characteristics (Havila et al. 2004; Holma et al. 2009; Holma 2010) that affect the atmosphere of triadic relationship, the triadic approach helps tackle the intricacy of public–private partnerships that involve professional purchasers (cf. Erridge & Greer 2002; Erridge & McIlroy 2002; Rees & Gardner 2003; Lawther & Martin 2005; Bovaird 2006; Purchase et al. 2009).

The study proposes that even though the involvement of the third party complicates public procurement, it is critical as the professional purchaser acts as the intermediary that provides its expertise throughout the public procurement process (see Table 2). This stresses the higher level knowledge required for public procurement.

Table 2. The relationship atmosphere of triadic public–private partnership.

Relationship atmosphere	Triadic public–private partnership	Role of the third party
State of co-operation	Involvement of the third party and centralized public procurement complicates contract preparation and the explicit co-ordination of responsibilities	Third party provides procurement expertise for contract negotiations and support for contract enforcement
Power–dependence relationship	Internal coalitions of the public sector, centralized public procurement and public procurement regulations tend to secure the quantity of alternative propositions and increase the negotiation power of the public sector	Third party dispels the unbalanced power–dependence relationship through its co-operative attitude
Closeness between the parties	Apparent cultural differences between the sectors establish social distance	Third party increases the closeness through its desire to understand and satisfy the needs of both sectors
Trust between the parties	Triadic trust develops through the actions of the three parties	Third party supports triadic trust through the explicit determination of co-ordination of responsibilities
Commitment	The need of the actors to bind themselves to public–private partnership is not restricted to the contract	Third party affects parties' commitment through closeness and trust

Further, the third party acts as the intermediary that provides its support to establish closer partnerships between the public and private sector. At length, through its co-operative attitude and the co-ordination of responsibilities (Hallén & Sandström 1988), professional purchasers help develop closeness, trust and commitment between the public and private sector. This is relevant as interaction helps share knowledge and it increases sectors' capabilities to discover novel solutions (McGuire 2006), reduce risks (Cunningham & Turnbull 1982) and develop reciprocal partnerships (Arbjørn & Freytag 2012).

This study helps both the public and private sector to develop their partnership and therefore revise improve public procurement practices. For instance, the co-operative attitude of the third party is underlined as it affects PPPs and public procurement by reducing the feeling of unbalanced power–dependence relationship and helping increase the feeling of closeness, trust and commitment between the three parties. In practice, routines that facilitate reciprocal negotiations and other joint activities need stressing.

The careful description of selected research methods, sources and how they are transformed into conclusions (Symon & Cassell 2012) are provided to permit readers to audit, understand and assess the decisions of the researcher. Nevertheless, the chief restriction of the study is that it rests on the limited data and hence the results should be explored in other contexts to enrich our knowledge on triadic public–private partnerships.

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