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Citation (APA)
Ninan, J., Di Maddaloni, F., Kujala, J., Lehtinen, J., & van Marrewijk, A. (2026). A Relational Process Perspective on Joint Value Creation With Nonmarket Stakeholders in Unwanted Projects. *Project Management Journal*, *57*(5), 559-570. https://doi.org/10.1177/87569728261476615

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Editorial

A Relational Process Perspective on Joint Value Creation With Nonmarket Stakeholders in Unwanted Projects

Project Management Journal
2026, Vol. 57(5) 559–570
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DOI: 10.1177/87569728261476615
journals.sagepub.com/home/pmx
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Johan Ninan[1,2], Francesco Di Maddaloni[3,4], Johanna Kujala[5], Jere Lehtinen[6], and Alfons van Marrewijk[1,7,8]

Abstract

Although nonmarket stakeholders fundamentally shape project performance, their engagement in "unwanted projects"—initiatives perceived by the general public and/or local communities as undesirable due to contested values or negative impacts—remains undertheorized. This editorial advances project studies by establishing a relational process perspective on value creation with nonmarket stakeholders. Rather than viewing stakeholder engagement as a linear delivery mechanism, we argue that it unfolds as an ongoing process of negotiation shaped by contested values, resistance, legitimacy struggles, distributional tensions, and temporality. Drawing on eight contributions in this special issue, we develop a relational process view of unwanted project organizing in which value is continuously cocreated through framing across temporalities, generative conflict, mediative dialogue, sociotechnical mediation, and distributed enfranchisement rather than delivered linearly. Finally, we propose a forward-looking research agenda centered on governing value plurality and temporal dynamics, engaging generative conflict in value creation, cultivating mediate capabilities and internal sensemaking, reconfiguring engagement through sociotechnical infrastructure, and governance of value distribution and stakeholder enfranchisement.

Keywords

stakeholder engagement, nonmarket stakeholder, value creation, resistance, relational process perspective

Introduction

Projects increasingly operate at the intersection of economic development, societal transformation, and public scrutiny (Locatelli et al., 2023). Although they are often framed as engines of innovation and progress (Vosman et al., 2023), many projects simultaneously generate controversy, resistance, and competing interpretations of value (Di Maddaloni et al., 2025; Martinsuo et al., 2019). Unwanted projects are democratically authorized initiatives whose legitimacy is contested by affected communities, citizens, or civil society organizations, resulting in temporary sustained social resistance (Cornelio et al., 2021; van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019). These projects are the subjects of intense debate or contention among stakeholders because of expected negative impacts, contested values, or both (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2019; Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2019). Although contested projects are projects characterized by persistent disagreement among stakeholders regarding their goals, implementation, governance, or anticipated outcomes (Gil & Beckman, 2025), stakeholders in unwanted projects fundamentally oppose the project (Cornelio et al., 2021; van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019). Unwanted projects challenge traditional project management assumptions of linear delivery, instrumental stakeholder control and success evaluated through the iron triangle. They foreground tensions between project objectives and the concerns of nonmarket stakeholders, which include local communities, advocacy groups, and the broader public.

[1]Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands
[2]University of Technology Sydney, Australia
[3]University College London, United Kingdom
[4]University of Johannesburg, South Africa
[5]Tampere University, Finland
[6]University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland
[7]BI Norwegian Business School Oslo, Norway
[8]Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Corresponding Author:
Johan Ninan, Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands; University of Technology Sydney, Australia.

We see a need for a relational theory of contested project organizing—one that conceptualizes projects as arenas where multiple actors negotiate competing interpretations of value, legitimacy, and future outcomes (Farid & Waldorff, 2022). Such a perspective joins previous ideas of relational stakeholder theory (Civera et al., 2025; Corazza et al., 2024; Kujala et al., 2016), temporary organizing (Bakker et al., 2016; Soderlund & Sydow, 2019), and moves beyond conventional stakeholder management perspectives that assume projects can ultimately align stakeholder interests through appropriate managerial interventions (e.g., Scheepers et al., 2022). Instead, unwanted projects can be understood as continuously negotiated organizational phenomena in which disagreement, ambiguity, and competing claims are enduring rather than temporary conditions.

This special issue, "Joint Value Creation With Nonmarket Stakeholders in Unwanted Projects," aims to advance scholarly understanding and managerial practice of how nonmarket stakeholders contribute to joint value creation in unwanted projects. Recent studies highlight a shift toward more relational and inclusive perspectives that emphasize engagement as an ongoing process of negotiation and value cocreation (Aaltonen et al., 2024; Kujala et al., 2022; Tumpa et al., 2026). In unwanted projects, such relational dynamics become particularly salient because project value is contested, multidimensional, and continuously shaped through interaction (Di Maddaloni et al., 2026; Martinsuo, 2020; Zwikael & Huemann, 2023). As we emphasized in the initial call for papers for this special issue (Lehtinen et al., 2023), the crucial role of nonmarket stakeholders—together with the need for careful engagement with them in addressing potential negative externalities and enabling value creation—calls for more advanced, sustainable, and value-oriented project management practices.

The eight articles included in this special issue contribute to its aim by examining how joint value creation emerges through engagement with nonmarket stakeholders under conditions of controversy, resistance, and complexity. Rather than treating opposition as merely a barrier to project delivery, these contributions demonstrate that conflict, divergent values, and stakeholder complexity are intrinsic features of contemporary projects and potential sources of innovation and learning.

In this editorial, we first explore and elaborate on the relational process perspective of stakeholder engagement in unwanted projects by discussing its various components and arguing its value for the academic debate. We then discuss how the special issue was initiated, how the eight articles were selected, and how they together contribute to the relational process perspective on stakeholder engagement. Finally, we present a research agenda for future research for studying the process of stakeholder engagement in unwanted projects.

Nonmarket Stakeholders

Project management scholarship has long recognized stakeholders as actors who influence the performance and outcomes of organizations and projects (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2010; Aaltonen et al., 2024; El-Gohary et al., 2006; Freeman et al., 2025). Within this broad landscape, we define nonmarket stakeholders as social, political, and community actors—such as local residents, civil society organizations, advocacy groups, regulators, and the broader public—whose interaction with the project is not mediated by direct economic or contractual transactions (Baron, 1995; Mellahi et al., 2016). Unlike market stakeholders (e.g., investors, contractors, buyers) whose relationships are defined by financial exchanges, nonmarket stakeholders exert influence and experience impacts primarily through social, regulatory, and political channels (Di Maddaloni & Sabini, 2022; Gil & Fu, 2022). Projects frequently prioritize market stakeholders and instrumental engagement strategies over nonmarket stakeholders (Miles, 2017). The possible negative externalities of unwanted projects hinder their value creation potential to nonmarket stakeholders and draw significant public attention, media coverage, and scrutiny (Ninan & Sergeeva, 2022). Addressing the negative externalities and enabling value creation to nonmarket stakeholders calls for a fair governance of value distribution and a careful engagement of these stakeholders.

There is a growing body of research on nonmarket stakeholders (Kujala et al., 2022; Ninan et al., 2019) and joint value creation in both stakeholder and project management literatures (Pauna et al., 2023; Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020; Tantalo & Priem, 2016; Tapaninaho & Kujala, 2019; Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2019). Joint value creation is a process in which stakeholders work together and influence one another, creating opportunities for synergy over a project's life cycle (Martinsuo, 2020). Lehtinen et al. (2019) explain how actors create value through jointly planned and governed design principles and value-leveraging activities, with leader actors coordinating and facilitating platform actors' value capture. By delivering value we mean the activities, processes, and strategies that organizations use to produce benefits at a reasonable cost, either in specific projects or through project business in general (Martinsuo et al., 2019). Value is thus negotiated, constructed, and created among stakeholders and can be financial, political (Eskerod & Ang, 2017), and aesthetical (De Molli et al., 2026).

The role and participation of nonmarket stakeholders in creating joint project value are often overlooked and under-researched in project literature. There is a dearth of studies focusing on the engagement and enfranchisement of nonmarket stakeholders in the joint value creation activities of unwanted projects. Although stakeholder engagement involves the systematic interaction between

project organizations and stakeholders to understand their interests, manage relationships, and enhance project performance, stakeholder enfranchisement allows citizens to directly participate in the decision-making process (Vuorinen et al., 2024). Whereas stakeholder management traditionally implies an instrumental, firm-centric approach aimed at predicting, controlling, and aligning stakeholder interests to ensure linear project delivery, stakeholder engagement represents an ongoing process of multidirectional interaction, dialogue, and value negotiation among diverse actors. Nonmarket stakeholders, such as local communities, citizens, or civil society organizations, are easily ignored by project organizations of unwanted projects due to their possible negative influences on project delivery, for example through resistance (Gonzalez-Porras et al., 2021) and due to their vulnerable position, stemming from their lack of direct economic exchange and well-defined property rights over these projects (Gil, 2023).

We understand stakeholder engagement in unwanted projects as a dynamic process in which nonmarket stakeholders are not merely recipients of project impacts or sources of resistance. Instead, drawing on narrative perspectives in project organizing (Sergeeva & Winch, 2021; Winch & Sergeeva, 2022; Ninan & Sergeeva, 2022), they actively participate as performative actors who continuously construct, contest, and negotiate project narratives and frames to influence project outcomes. A process perspective on stakeholder engagement in unwanted projects treats engagement as a dynamic, relational sequence rather than a one-off activity (Whyte et al., 2024). Nonmarket stakeholders influence project trajectories through organizational narratives and counter-narratives (Ninan et al., 2025) and by perceiving engagement as meaningful collaboration or as compliance-oriented managerial control, thereby shaping both support and resistance dynamics over time (Sergeeva & Winch, 2021). They also possess situated knowledge, legitimacy, social resources, and contextual expertise that can contribute to more sustainable, socially acceptable, and resilient project outcomes. Recognizing nonmarket stakeholders as active contributors to the project process broadens conventional understanding of project governance and value creation, particularly in unwanted projects where joint value must be cocreated through the very contestation of contested values and negative externalities.

Stakeholder Engagement as an Ongoing Relational Process

A process perspective on stakeholder engagement in unwanted projects foregrounds continuous negotiation among diverse actors, as well as the production and contestation of narratives, frames, and mechanisms for enfranchisement that allow nonmarket stakeholders to influence project trajectories (Brunet et al., 2021). A process perspective deepens the study of the actuality of projects, which is the "complex social processes that go on at various levels of project working" (Cicmil et al., 2006, p. 675) and invites "us to view actors, objects, places, identities, and projects, as continuously produced and reproduced in actions, interactions, practices, which then become the focus of studies" (Sergi et al., 2020, p. 4). Rather than viewing stakeholder resistance as a temporary deviation from orderly project delivery (e.g., Tryggestad et al., 2013), a process perspective suggests that contestation itself constitutes a central organizing condition through which project value, legitimacy, and governance arrangements are continuously negotiated (van Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019; Whyte et al., 2024). For example, Hetemi et al. (2021) empirically show how contestation and choice unfold over time and across levels in large projects. Toward this end we explore and elaborate on the process perspective.

We see a need for a relational theory of contested project organizing—one that conceptualizes projects as arenas where multiple actors negotiate competing interpretations of value, legitimacy, and future outcomes (Farid & Waldorff, 2022). Such a perspective joins previous ideas of relational stakeholder theory (Civera et al., 2025; Corazza et al., 2024; Kujala et al., 2016) and temporary organizing (Bakker et al., 2016; Soderlund & Sydow, 2019) and moves beyond conventional stakeholder management perspectives that assume projects can ultimately align stakeholder interests through appropriate managerial interventions (e.g., Scheepers et al., 2022). Instead, unwanted projects can be understood as continuously negotiated organizational phenomena in which disagreement, ambiguity, and competing claims are enduring rather than temporary conditions.

Following this position, joint value creation is not a linear outcome achieved through alignment, but an emergent process shaped by ongoing interaction among heterogeneous stakeholders operating under conditions of plurality, contestation, and institutional complexity. Although joint value creation is traditionally built on stakeholders' joint interests, ability to collaborate, and trust among the firm and its stakeholders (Kujala et al., 2019), contested and unwanted projects frequently operate under conditions of fundamental uncertainty in which project goals, implementation pathways, and success criteria remain fluid and negotiable throughout the project life cycle (Maylor & Turner, 2017; Hetemi et al., 2021). Such projects resemble *open projects* characterized by evolving objectives, unknown unknowns, and dynamic sociopolitical complexity that continuously reshape stakeholder expectations and engagement practices (Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2019).

A relational process perspective also foregrounds questions of stakeholder enfranchisement. Beyond participation in consultation activities, unwanted projects

increasingly require mechanisms through which nonmarket stakeholders can meaningfully influence project trajectories, governance arrangements, and definitions of project success. From this perspective, stakeholder engagement is political and relational, involving ongoing negotiations over whose voices count, whose interests are prioritized, and how project value is defined and distributed across stakeholder groups (Eskerod & Larsen, 2018; Van Buren & Greenwood, 2009). The social construction of project value unfolds as stakeholders interact (Gil, 2023). Stakeholders may resist existing engagement processes because of conflicting interests or values (van Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019), and because they lack the knowledge, resources, confidence, or organizational support required to contribute effectively to project decision-making and implementation activities.

Furthermore, a relational process perspective avoids a simple dichotomy between project progress and resistance. We argue that resistance should not be understood solely as obstruction to project delivery, but as what Courpasson et al. (2012) call "productive resistance." In productive resistance, stakeholder skepticism and counter-engagement may surface unresolved value tensions, legitimacy deficits, or organizational blind spots, thereby creating opportunities for learning, adaptive governance, and more socially sustainable project trajectories (Nguyen, 2026). Moreover, challenges and inconveniences may unfold even when stakeholders have shared goals and engage collaboratively (Blomberg et al., 2026). Recognizing the various ways through which stakeholders can be given a voice and engage allows for appreciating the diversity of views and contributions nonmarket stakeholders may offer to the project and its management. For example, stakeholders can become active contributors shaping project trajectories and definitions of success (Reypens et al., 2016) through participatory planning and shared sensemaking practices, which can reduce uncertainty and foster more durable forms of stakeholder commitment in contested settings.

Finally, a relational process perspective emphasizes temporality. Stakeholder engagement in unwanted projects evolves across front-end planning, execution, operation, and post-project phases. Stakeholder relationships, conflict dynamics, and interpretations of value continuously shift over time as projects encounter new societal expectations. Understanding these temporal dynamics is therefore central to explaining how unwanted projects become stabilized, transformed, resisted, or re-legitimized throughout their life cycles. Temporal dynamics also shape how narratives, stakeholder identities, and legitimacy claims evolve throughout contested projects (Winch & Sergeeva, 2022). Stakeholder support and opposition are continuously reconstructed through interaction, prior experiences, and shifting interpretations of future project consequences.

Reflecting on the Publication Process

The idea for this special issue emerged in late 2022 when Jere Lehtinen, Johan Ninan, and Francesco Di Maddaloni initiated discussions on the need for a dedicated scholarly conversation around nonmarket stakeholder engagement in projects. Early meetings with the Editor-in-Chief of *Project Management Journal*® (PMJ), Giorgio Locatelli, played an important role in refining our focus, clarifying the current challenges of project delivery, and proposing the "unwanted" context as a fruitful setting for advancing the debate on stakeholder engagement and value creation within project studies. To further broaden and deepen the intellectual foundations of the initiative, senior scholars Johanna Kujala and Alfons van Marrewijk joined the editorial team helping us create a call for papers for a special issue on "Joint Value Creation With Nonmarket Stakeholders in Unwanted Projects" (Lehtinen et al., 2023).

Throughout the development process of submitted papers, the guest editors worked closely with prospective authors to strengthen underdeveloped conceptual and empirical areas and help position the papers within the broader debate on contested project organizing. The resulting full papers were subsequently subjected to a rigorous double-blind review process involving anonymous reviewers alongside one member of the editorial team. The final acceptance rate for the special issue was intentionally selective, reflecting the ambition of the guest editorial team to publish high-quality contributions that advance existing debates and broaden the scope of research on joint value creation with nonmarket stakeholders in unwanted projects.

Taken together, the eight articles in this special issue do more than provide empirical insights into unwanted projects. We acknowledge and appreciate the methodological and empirical plurality of these contributions; the diversity is commendable. Importantly, the methodological diversity also reflects the processual and relational nature of unwanted projects themselves helping capture the evolving stakeholder dynamics, contested meanings, digital interactions, and emergent forms of resistance across organizational and societal contexts. The diversity in methods mirrors the broad conceptual and epistemological foundations of the stakeholder engagement literature, as well as the expansive debates currently shaping the field of project studies on joint value creation. Furthermore, the contributions provide a wide range of geographical locations such as Uruguay, Finland, Vietnam, China, Australia, South Africa, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. Such a representation, including the Global South, has been identified as a need in project studies (Geraldi et al., 2020).

Overview of Contributions in This Special Issue

Here we introduce the eight articles in this special issue (for an overview, see Table 1). We discuss the contributions of these articles to five emerging dimensions of a relational process perspective of nonmarket stakeholders in unwanted projects: (1) plurality and temporal framing; (2) generative conflict and resistance; (3) mediative dialogue and facilitation; (4) sociotechnical mediation; and (5) legitimacy, complexity, and distributional enfranchisement.

The first dimension on "plurality and temporal framing" concerns the plurality of project value and the role of stakeholder framing in shaping engagement dynamics. Gonzales-Porras (2026) demonstrates how stakeholders construct competing *wanted* and *unwanted* frames around megaprojects, revealing that engagement practices are deeply influenced by interpretive processes rather than solely by formal governance structures. Extending this insight, Whyte et al. (2026) introduce the concept of temporally situated value systems, showing how stakeholders mobilize different past experiences and imagined futures when evaluating project outcomes. Their analysis highlights that disagreements often reflect fundamentally different evaluative logics rather than failures of communication or participation. Together, these contributions challenge traditional assumptions that stakeholder engagement leads to consensus (Scheepers et al., 2022), instead positioning the management of persistent value plurality as a central capability in unwanted projects. Importantly, several of the articles indirectly point toward the role of internal organizational dynamics in shaping stakeholder engagement processes (e.g., Baartmans et al., 2026; Gonzalez-Porras, 2026). Unwanted projects may face not only external opposition but also skepticism within project-owning organizations themselves, particularly when projects challenge existing routines, resource allocations, or organizational identities.

The second dimension on "generative conflict and resistance" highlights how conflict and resistance can play a productive role. Across the contributions, resistance emerges not merely as a barrier but as a mechanism through which project value is negotiated and reshaped. Nguyen's (2026) grounded theory study demonstrates how collective landowner resistance prompts project organizations to adopt adaptive strategies and collaborative solutions that enhance social value. Similarly, the framing dynamics identified by Gonzales-Porras (2026) and the competing value systems examined by Whyte et al. (2026) show how tensions expose underlying assumptions and create opportunities for renegotiating project trajectories. These findings suggest a reconceptualization of conflict as constitutive of value creation, aligning with relational views of organizing in which interaction and negotiation are primary drivers of innovation and learning.

The third dimension on "mediative dialogue and facilitation" highlights the importance of dialogue in resolving conflicts between project organizations and nonmarket stakeholders. Through an abductively developed typology of dialogue practices, including decoupling, buffering, healing, and bypassing, Gaito (2026) demonstrates how third-party facilitation can help stakeholders move from adversarial relationships toward conditions that enable constructive engagement and collaborative problem-solving. Importantly, the study highlights that stakeholder conflict is driven by relational disruptions and perceptions of malevolence that shape willingness to participate in dialogue. In doing so, the article contributes a processual and relational perspective on how contested projects may create conditions for joint value creation even in highly conflictual settings.

A fourth dimension on "sociotechnical mediation of engagement" underscores how emerging sociotechnical infrastructures transform engagement dynamics and narrative contestation. Jiang et al. (2026) demonstrate how digital platforms act as real-time mediation mechanisms, enabling interactive engagement, amplifying nonmarket stakeholder voices, and facilitating collaborative value cocreation. At the same time, these digital spaces introduce new governance challenges around narrative control and the rapid diffusion of competing interpretations. Together with offline practices, digital environments reshape the relational spaces in which project meaning, value, and legitimacy are negotiated.

A fifth dimension on "legitimacy, enfranchisement, and system complexity" highlights that achieving legitimacy and enfranchising nonmarket stakeholders unfolds within complex, adaptive relational systems. Moving beyond compliance-oriented views, Raudasoja et al. (2025) illustrate how securing a social license to operate (SLO) requires navigating progressive stages of acceptance—from legitimacy to credibility and trust—through sustained relational engagement. Grounding this staging in the legitimacy-as-process literature (Suddaby et al., 2017) and project legitimation dynamics (Hetemi et al., 2021) reinforces that project legitimacy is not a static property achieved at the front end, but is continuously created, recreated, and conquered across the project life cycle.

However, attempts at inclusion are fraught with structural tensions. Baartmans et al. (2026) provide a nuanced analysis of how exclusion emerges in practice, showing that even well-intentioned managerial choices designed to foster openness can paradoxically generate specific forms of closure and marginalization. Complementing this, Worsley and Massyn (2026) identify key drivers of stakeholder complexity such as power asymmetries, social justice concerns, and shifting relational interactions. Their findings demonstrate that stakeholder complexity is an emergent property of adaptive systems rather than a static counts-based metric. Together, these studies emphasize

Table 1. Overview of the Articles

Authors	Focus and Research Question	Methodology	Main Contribution	Remaining Gap and Limitations
Gonzalez-Porras (2026)	Examines how diverse stakeholder perceptions ("frames") shape stakeholder engagement in megaprojects	Qualitative case study (UPM Paso de los Toros megaproject in Uruguay)	Introduces framing-based understanding of stakeholder diversity; links perception diversity, stakeholder relationships, engagement types; emphasizes inclusive engagement beyond firm-centric prioritization	Limited generalizability from single case; focuses mainly on perception diversity rather than power dynamics or institutional constraints shaping engagement outcomes
Raudasoja et al. (2025)	Investigates managerial strategies to enhance social acceptance and achieve social license to operate (SLO)	Qualitative case study (a wind farm project in Finland)	Provides structured approach to managing social acceptance via intentional SLO levels (legitimacy, credibility, trust); emphasizes early involvement and stakeholder integration	Limited theoretical development beyond SLO framing; focuses on managerial perspective, less on stakeholder agency or conflict dynamics
Nguyen (2026)	Explores how project organizations respond to landowner resistance and cocreate social value in contentious projects	Grounded theory (25 interviews + 4 case studies in Vietnam)	Shows conflict as a mechanism for social value cocreation; identifies repertoire of response strategies and interplay of influence and counterinfluence	Context-specific (Vietnam construction sector); reactive engagement strategies still conceptually underdeveloped
Jiang et al. (2026)	Examines how social media enables stakeholder interaction and value cocreation in large-scale tourism projects	Two case studies in China using abductive analysis; web-crawled social media data (TikTok)	Demonstrates digital platforms as mechanisms for real-time stakeholder engagement, expectation management, and collaborative value shaping	Focuses on digital interactions; less attention to offline governance structures or power asymmetries among stakeholders
Whyte et al. (2026)	Investigates why conflicting stakeholder understandings persist despite engagement efforts	Qualitative case study (Rozelle Interchange in Australia); pragmatic sociology lens	Introduces concept of temporally situated value systems explaining irreconcilable perspectives; challenges assumption that alignment is always possible.	Strong theoretical framing but limited managerial prescriptions; single critical transition phase (opening) emphasized
Worsley & Massyn (2026)	Identifies drivers of stakeholder complexity in infrastructure projects and implications for engagement	Comparative case studies (South African infrastructure projects)	Identifies six drivers of stakeholder complexity; highlights inclusive and adaptive engagement strategies	Primarily descriptive framework; less theoretical integration with broader value cocreation or conflict literature
Gaito (2026)	Examines how third party-assisted dialogue addresses conflicts	Abductive qualitative study based on expert interviews from Switzerland and Germany	Develops a relational typology of dialogue practices showing how suspicion, distrust, and value conflicts can be transformed into constructive engagement	Focuses primarily on mediated dialogue processes and conflict settings; limited attention to long-term institutional outcomes
Baartmans et al. (2026)	Explores how project managers shape the inclusion and	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPS) based on	Focuses on forms of closure in managerial decision-making by	Analytical analysis strongly embedded within a specific institutional

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Authors	Focus and Research Question	Methodology	Main Contribution	Remaining Gap and Limitations
	exclusion of nonmarket stakeholders in early engagement	expert interviews from the Netherlands	identifying patterns of stakeholder exclusion actively constructed through specific managerial practices in choice situations	governance framework. Single managerial perspective captured at the front end; limited attention to how inclusion and exclusion evolve over time

that joint value creation requires fair governance mechanisms capable of navigating systemic complexity, enfranchising marginalized actors, and addressing distributional tensions.

A Relational Process Research Agenda for Contested Project Organizing

Viewed collectively, the articles in this special issue position unwanted projects as revealing cases that expose the fundamentally relational nature of project organizing. Joint value creation emerges through the interplay of stakeholder framing (Gonzales-Porras, 2026), temporally embedded value systems (Whyte et al., 2026), mediative dialogue and relational repair in conflict settings (Gaito, 2026), and generative resistance and adaptive responses (Nguyen, 2026). It is also shaped by legitimacy-building practices (Raudasoja et al., 2025), recurring patterns of openness and closure toward stakeholders (Baartmans et al., 2026), digitally mediated engagement (Jiang et al., 2026), and evolving stakeholder complexity (Worsley & Massyn, 2026). By integrating these perspectives, this special issue advances a relational process theory of contested project organizing that shifts attention from managing stakeholders toward understanding how projects become arenas for negotiating collective futures. This perspective also shifts attention toward more inclusive and relational forms of governance that extend beyond contractual coordination and firm-centric control (Sankaran et al., 2025). Relational governance operationalizes project oversight through multistakeholder arenas, ongoing dialogue, and procedural fairness. Such arrangements create formal and informal spaces for nonmarket stakeholders to participate in decision-making, renegotiate project parameters, and ensure that value distribution reflects broad societal interests throughout the project life cycle. Unwanted projects increasingly depend on informal relationships, negotiated legitimacy, and multistakeholder forms of organizing through which project directions and outcomes are continuously reconfigured. This relational process lens invites scholars to rethink project management not as the pursuit of alignment but as the ongoing coordination of plural and often competing value claims.

Building on the relational process perspective developed across the contributions in this special issue, we propose a future research agenda structured around five interconnected theoretical pillars: (1) governing value plurality and temporal dynamics, (2) engaging generative conflict in value creation, (3) cultivating mediative capabilities and internal sensemaking, (4) reconfiguring engagement through evolving sociotechnical infrastructures, and (5) governance of value distribution and stakeholder enfranchisement. Together, these pillars extend project studies beyond instrumental stakeholder management toward a relational understanding of how joint value creation unfolds in contested environments (Lehtinen et al., 2023).

Pillar 1: Governing Value Plurality and Temporal Dynamics

The first pillar highlights that unwanted projects are characterized by multiple, often incompatible interpretations of project value. Stakeholder framing processes (Gonzales-Porras, 2026) and temporally situated value systems (Whyte et al., 2026) reveal that disagreements stem from deeply embedded evaluative logics rather than simply from insufficient engagement. This insight challenges long-standing assumptions within project management that alignment and consensus represent the ultimate goals of stakeholder engagement (Scheepers et al., 2022; Tantalo & Priem, 2016). Future research should therefore shift toward theorizing how projects operate under conditions of persistent plurality. Rather than asking how project organizations achieve agreement, scholars may investigate how governance arrangements enable coordination among actors who maintain fundamentally different perspectives (Liu et al., 2019; Sankaran et al., 2025). This includes examining how project actors manage competing institutional logics; negotiate trade-offs among social, environmental, and economic objectives; and sustain collaboration without resolving underlying tensions. Such work would align project scholarship more closely with broader management research on institutional complexity and pluralistic organizing (Reypens et al., 2021),

contributing to a richer understanding of how projects function as arenas of collective sensemaking.

Pillar 2: Engaging Generative Conflict in Value Creation

A second pillar emerging from the special issue concerns the roles of conflict and resistance as generative forces in project organizing. The contributions illustrate that stakeholder opposition can stimulate adaptive learning, innovation, and renegotiation of project trajectories. Nguyen's (2026) study demonstrates how collective landowner resistance prompts collaborative problem-solving, whereas the analyses by Gonzales-Porras (2026) and Whyte et al. (2026) show how competing perspectives expose underlying assumptions and enable alternative interpretations of project success. Gaito (2026) further demonstrates that the relational quality underlying stakeholder conflict—particularly suspicion, distrust, and perceived malevolence—significantly shapes whether engagement processes become constructive or escalate toward polarization. This suggests that future research should pay greater attention to stakeholder perception of organizational arrangements, the mediative mechanisms and relational conditions through which stakeholder dialogue and engagement become possible in contested projects (Di Maddaloni & Derakhshan, 2024; Zanfelicce et al., 2026). Future research should therefore reconceptualize conflict in unwanted projects as an inherent feature of joint value creation rather than as a disruption to be mitigated. This involves exploring how project organizations design engagement processes that embrace disagreement, how power asymmetries influence whether conflict leads to productive outcomes or entrenched polarization, and how project teams navigate paradoxical demands from diverse stakeholders (Courpasson et al., 2012). Future studies could further examine the roles of neutral intermediaries, dialogue facilitation practices, and conflict mediation infrastructures in enabling collaborative value creation under conditions of deep disagreement and institutional distrust. Integrating insights from relational stakeholder theory and paradox research (Pinto, 2019) may offer promising avenues for understanding how projects sustain momentum in the presence of ongoing contestation. Future research should also investigate how internal organizational skepticism shapes the implementation of contested projects. Although stakeholder studies have examined resistance from external nonmarket actors (Babaei et al., 2023; Ninan et al., 2019; Teo & Loosemore, 2017), internal stakeholders may similarly resist projects perceived as externally imposed, strategically misaligned, or operationally disruptive. Understanding how project organizations cultivate willingness, sensemaking, and capability among internal actors represents an important extension of relational stakeholder theory in project studies.

Pillar 3: Cultivating Mediative Capabilities and Internal Sensemaking

A third pillar concerns the internal organization of unwanted projects. This special issue shows that contestation is not only external to the project but also internal to project-owning organizations, where legitimacy, strategic priority, and resource allocation must be interpreted and aligned (Civera et al., 2025). In their article, Worsley and Massyn (2026) build upon the work on sensemaking as elaborated by Maitlis and Christianson (2014) to understand how project managers in three South African cases read and interpret signals from stakeholders to shape their understanding of the environment and anticipate internal reactions. External and internal contestation are by no means separate domains but should be understood as interconnected as shown in the literature discussing competing institutional logics (Mahalingam, 2022).

Future research should examine how organizations develop the sensemaking capacity, coordination routines, and engagement capabilities needed to respond constructively to external resistance and misalignment. This includes studying how internal skepticism is managed, how responsibility for stakeholder engagement is distributed, and how organizational actors negotiate tensions between delivery imperatives and relational accountability. Understanding these internal dynamics is essential for explaining why some projects remain defensive and closed, whereas others become more adaptive, responsive, and capable of joint value creation.

Pillar 4: Reconfiguring Engagement Through Sociotechnical Infrastructures

The fourth pillar concerns the transformation of stakeholder engagement practices through evolving sociotechnical infrastructures such as digital platforms. The contributions highlight traditional legitimacy-building processes such as the development of a social license to operate (Raudasoja et al., 2025). They also show how inclusion and exclusion in early stakeholder engagement are shaped by managerial decisions in which opening up strategic processes inherently involves closures privileging representatives, joint commitment, technical expertise and internal legitimacy—at the expense of broader inclusion of nonmarket stakeholders (Baartmans et al., 2026). Finally, they point to emerging digital engagement practices that reshape stakeholder participation (Jiang et al., 2026). Digital platforms enable real-time dialogue, expand participation beyond traditional boundaries, and introduce new dynamics of visibility and narrative competition. In

the digital era, stakeholder engagement increasingly unfolds across interconnected online and offline arenas where narratives, resistance movements, legitimacy claims, and public scrutiny evolve rapidly and often unpredictably (Ninan et al., 2025). These transformations challenge traditional assumptions regarding formation and maintenance of virtual collaborations and organizational control over stakeholder communication and project meaning making (Rankinen et al, 2026). Future research should examine how digitally mediated engagement alters power relationships among stakeholders and transforms expectations regarding transparency, participation, and responsiveness. This includes investigating how algorithmic dynamics influence whose voices are amplified, how organizations integrate digital discourse into formal decision-making processes, and how hybrid physical–digital engagement spaces reshape project governance. Understanding these transformations is essential as projects increasingly operate within interconnected sociotechnical ecosystems rather than bounded organizational contexts.

Pillar 5: Governance of Value Distribution and Stakeholder Enfranchisement

The fifth and final pillar focuses on the fair governance of value distribution, one of the key topics in joint value creation with nonmarket stakeholders in unwanted projects. Project governance is understood here as a set of mechanisms that regulates the interaction among stakeholders at multiple levels to realize a certain project performance (Artto et al., 2009). Governance has the capability to engage simultaneously with multiple stakeholders from various sectors (Sankaran et al., 2025) but might produce asymmetric outcomes in which economic benefits accrue to some stakeholders while social or environmental burdens are disproportionately experienced by others (Di Maddaloni et al., 2025; Gil & Fu, 2022). Therefore, a relational process perspective requires attention to the distributional dimensions of project value. Joint value creation therefore needs to be understood from questions of value distribution, compensation, procedural fairness, and recognition of stakeholder vulnerability. Examining how such distributional tensions evolve throughout the project life cycle represents an important avenue for future stakeholder research in project studies.

Taken together, these five pillars suggest that joint value creation in unwanted projects is not achieved through linear stakeholder alignment, but through ongoing relational work across plural values, conflict mediation, and internal organizational capacities. By framing unwanted projects as arenas of negotiated futures, this special issue invites project scholars to move beyond instrumental stakeholder management toward a more processual and relational understanding of organizing under uncertainty as has been asked for earlier (Clegg et al., 2020). In doing so, the special issue offers a foundation for research that treats disagreement in projects as a central condition of joint value creation in projects.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the authors who contributed to this special issue. We also thank the reviewers who helped us evaluate the manuscripts meticulously. We also thank the support of the reviewers and the PMJ Editors in Chief for their support and insightful feedback throughout the creation of this special issue.

ORCID iDs

Johan Ninan https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0255-0511
Francesco Di Maddaloni https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6798-8856

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