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A bridge too far? Analyzing cross-level strategizing challenges of an interorganizational strategy process on a collective bridge inventory

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines how interorganizational strategy processes unfold by analyzing cross-level decision-making challenges that recur when organizations jointly develop strategy while remaining embedded in their own organizational contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted a longitudinal qualitative case study of an interorganizational strategy process focused on a collective bridge inventory in a Dutch region. We followed an initiative for approximately one year, starting from its early formation. Using a layered analytical approach that distinguishes interpretation, structure and relations, we traced how the initiative transformed over time across organizational boundaries.

Findings – The study identifies three cross-level strategizing challenges: joint goal setting, shared ownership and pacing. These challenges did not appear as linear stages or discrete obstacles but repeatedly re-emerged. Joint goal setting was complicated by divergent organizational rationales, shared ownership emerged unevenly across actors and pacing reflected persistent temporal misalignments between interorganizational ambitions and intraorganizational capacities. Together, these cross-level dynamics shaped the trajectory of the strategy process.

Practical implications – For practitioners, we propose viewing these challenges as interpretive lenses to make sense of re-emerging tensions and diagnose when the strategy process may require temporary stabilization. Rather than designing “linking pins”, strategizing requires a continuous balancing effort between inter- and intraorganizational rationales.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to interorganizational strategizing research by conceptualizing cross-level challenges as dynamic and constitutive elements of strategy processes rather than background conditions. It offers a rare, in-depth, processual account of informal and horizontal interorganizational strategizing in response to complex societal challenges, extending open strategy research beyond the focal organization.

Keywords Interorganizational strategizing, Open strategy, Cross-level challenges, Infrastructure

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Organizations increasingly operate in societal contexts that challenge their assumed operational and strategic autonomy. These challenges are interconnected and difficult to address through individual organizational action. In response, organizations have begun to adopt more inclusive and transparent forms of strategizing, involving a wide range of actors

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(Hautz *et al.*, 2017). Scholars refer to this phenomenon as open strategy (Whittington *et al.*, 2011). While such openness can enhance learning and legitimacy, it also introduces tensions as organizations engage with external actors holding diverse interpretations and interests (Deken *et al.*, 2018).

Within this broader shift, scholars have begun to examine interorganizational strategizing, defined as “engaging in a strategy process jointly with other organizations” (de Gooyert *et al.*, 2019). In this study, we extend this definition to explicitly include attention to strategic orientation, conceptualizing an interorganizational strategy process as a decision-making process in which organizations collaboratively develop strategy to address a shared societal challenge. Such processes are not limited to dyadic interactions between a focal organization and its stakeholders, but often involve multilateral collaboration among multiple organizations operating in a networked setting (Grewatsch *et al.*, 2021; Bridoux and Stoelhorst, 2022; Couture *et al.*, 2023).

Despite growing interest in interorganizational strategy, research that provides an in-depth, processual understanding of how interorganizational strategy processes unfold remains limited. Existing studies often focus on outcomes, governance arrangements or retrospective accounts, offering only partial insight into how decision-making challenges emerge over time (Diriker *et al.*, 2022; Bansal *et al.*, 2022; Nicholson *et al.*, 2026). Moreover, while prior work acknowledges tensions between interorganizational strategizing, oriented toward collective goals and collaboration (Hettich and Kreutzer, 2021; Seidl and Werle, 2018), and intraorganizational strategizing, shaped by organizational priorities, accountability structures and resource constraints (Luedicke *et al.*, 2017; Hautz *et al.*, 2017), these tensions are rarely examined as a central object of analysis.

We refer to these intertwined decision-making problems as cross-level strategizing challenges: challenges that recur as actors are simultaneously aligning ongoing interorganizational collaboration with developing intraorganizational considerations. Although related issues are discussed across several literature, including strategy, public management and network governance, they are typically treated implicitly or as contextual conditions, rather than as dynamic and constitutive elements of interorganizational strategy processes. As a result, we lack empirical insight into how such cross-level challenges recur and shape the trajectory of interorganizational strategizing.

This paper aims to deepen our understanding of how interorganizational strategy processes unfold by examining the re-emergence of key cross-level strategizing challenges. We adopt a longitudinal perspective to capture ongoing enactment, negotiation and reconfiguration between inter- and intraorganizational rationales as they play out in practice. We analyze the strategy process using three analytical layers, interpretation, structure and relations, adapted from prior work (Couture *et al.*, 2023). These layers are used as an analytical instrument to organize and compare empirical observations over time, enabling us to trace tensions and ambiguities across levels. We address the following research question: “*What are key cross-level strategizing challenges that organizations engaged in an interorganizational strategy process encounter?*”

This paper is based on an in-depth longitudinal case study in a region of the Netherlands. The study follows the early formation and development of an initiative called “Collaborating for Smarter Renovation and Renewal” (CSRR), which aims to develop interorganizational strategy on a collective bridge inventory. These bridges are operated by either local governments, the national rail operator, the national road- and waterway operator or the regional government itself. While all actors face increasing pressures (e.g. aging infrastructure), coordination across organizational boundaries has historically been limited. Developing strategy on a collective bridge inventory therefore provides a rich empirical setting for examining the cross-level strategizing challenges inherent in an interorganizational strategy process.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 *Interorganizational strategizing beyond the focal organization*

Strategy research has increasingly recognized that more openness often challenges organizational boundaries. This shift is particularly visible in the literature on open strategy, which highlights more inclusive and transparent forms of strategizing involving actors beyond top management (Whittington *et al.*, 2011; Hautz *et al.*, 2017). While this body of work has generated important insights, much of it still proceeds from the perspective of a focal organization that selectively opens its strategy process to external stakeholders (Dobusch *et al.*, 2017; Hautz *et al.*, 2017).

Less attention has been paid to interorganizational strategizing, in which multiple organizations jointly engage in a strategy process without a clear hierarchical basis or dominant actor (de Gooyert *et al.*, 2019; Grewatsch *et al.*, 2021). Such processes are horizontal and multilateral, unfolding in networks rather than dyads (Bridoux and Stoelhorst, 2022). They are particularly prevalent in contexts characterized by societal challenges, where no single organization has the authority or resources to act alone (Grewatsch *et al.*, 2021; Hilbolling *et al.*, 2021).

Empirical research that examines how such interorganizational strategy processes unfold over time remains scarce. Existing studies often rely on retrospective accounts or emphasize outcomes over process (Diriker *et al.*, 2022; Amrollahi *et al.*, 2025). As a result, we still have a limited understanding of how tensions and ambiguities play out in practice when organizations jointly attempt to develop strategy.

2.2 *Strategy as a process across organizational levels*

From a processual perspective, strategy is viewed as an ongoing, recursive pattern of interactions that unfolds over time. It emphasizes temporality, emergence and the situated nature of efforts at strategizing, understood as unfolding in concrete interactions, meetings and decisions (Langley *et al.*, 1995; Langley, 2007). This orientation is particularly relevant for studying horizontal and multilateral processes, where actors' efforts at strategizing are often informal, iterative and only loosely structured (Berthod and Segato, 2019).

Moreover, it enables explicit attention to cross-level strategizing challenges as dynamic and constitutive elements of interorganizational strategy processes. During a strategy process, actor representatives are deliberately (and perhaps delicately) navigating the nexus between inter- and intraorganizational strategy. They are simultaneously engaging in joint strategizing and dealing with considerations inside their own organizations. Consequently, interorganizational rationales, underlying for example a joint goal or newly formed roundtable, may be at odds with intraorganizational rationales and vice versa.

Although prior research has acknowledged the coexistence of inter- and intraorganizational rationales, their interaction is often treated as a background condition rather than as a central analytical concern (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2020; de Gooyert *et al.*, 2019). As a result, we lack detailed empirical insight into the processual nature of the nexus between inter- and intraorganizational strategy.

2.3 *Cross-level strategizing challenges: conceptual grounding*

Decision-making challenges that cut across organizational levels are addressed across several bodies of literature, albeit under different labels and with varying emphases. In the strategy literature, scholars have pointed to tensions between collaboration and control, particularly in collaborative strategy processes (Hautz *et al.*, 2017; Luedicke *et al.*, 2017). Studies show that joint goal setting is often complicated by divergent organizational interests and interpretive frames, even when actors express a willingness to collaborate (Brielmaier and Friesl, 2021; Nathues *et al.*, 2021).

In public management research, cross-level challenges are frequently discussed in relation to stakeholder coordination and public value creation (Hansen *et al.*, 2022; Klijn and

Koppenjan, 2020; Krogh and Triantafillou, 2024). Also, research on institutional collective action highlights how fragmented authority complicates collective decision-making, even when actors face shared problems (Bridoux and Stoelhorst, 2022). However, the implications of interorganizational collaboration for intraorganizational strategy remain largely unexplored (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2020).

More broadly, the governance and interorganizational network literature underscore the temporal and cross-level nature of collaborative decision-making processes (Couture *et al.*, 2023; Berthod and Segato, 2019). Scholars note that differences in planning cycles and decision-making procedures often create pacing problems that undermine interorganizational collaboration over time (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson *et al.*, 2012; Bansal *et al.*, 2022). Berthod and Segato (2019) show how network formation and governance emerge through an ongoing interplay between network-level needs and organizational goals. While these studies acknowledge that coordination requires ongoing alignment between interorganizational arenas and intraorganizational affairs, such challenges are rarely examined as part of an unfolding strategy process.

As a result, insights into cross-level challenges remain fragmented across literature, limiting our ability to understand how interorganizational strategy processes unfold.

2.4 Implications for studying cross-level challenges over time

Adopting a processual perspective shifts attention away from viewing cross-level challenges as obstacles to be resolved toward understanding them as dynamic elements that are continuously enacted, negotiated and reconfigured in practice. Rather than following linear trajectories, such challenges persist and re-emerge across time (Hilbolling *et al.*, 2021; Berthod and Segato, 2019). Actors may try to navigate these cross-level dynamics through situated efforts, such as organizing a workshop, aimed at temporarily stabilizing the strategy process to enable continued strategizing.

Studying cross-level challenges therefore requires a longitudinal approach to examine how cross-level dynamics shape the trajectory of the strategy process. In the following section, we outline how a layered analytical approach allowed us to identify cross-level strategizing challenges over time.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research approach

We adopted a longitudinal, qualitative single-case study design to develop an in-depth understanding of how an interorganizational strategy process unfolds over time (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 1994). This process-oriented approach enables close examination of ongoing efforts at strategizing and recurring challenges. To structure our analysis, we used an analytical framework consisting of three layers: interpretation, structure and relations (see Table 1). These layers were tailored to the research context and served as sensitizing categories during data analysis. Interpretation captures problem perceptions and goal orientations, structure concerns the organization and coordination surrounding the initiative and relations refers to the degree of distributed decision-making. Importantly, the layers guided attention to different aspects of the strategy process but did not predetermine the identification of decision-making challenges, which emerged abductively from the data.

The indicators in Table 1 are illustrative examples of the types of empirical material we attended to during analysis, rather than excerpts from the findings themselves.

3.2 Case selection

The case was selected for two main reasons. First, CSRR explicitly aimed to develop interorganizational strategy rather than operational coordination. Second, it involved a broad

Table 1. Layered analytical framework

Layer	Operationalization	Illustrative indicators signaling each layer
Interpretation	Spoken and written communication focused on (shared) problem perceptions and (shared) goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘The problem is we don’t know how many bridges we have’ • ‘We need to be better prepared for the future’
Structure	The organization of ongoing activities at the level of projects, (shared) portfolios and/or the initiative itself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘What would really help is a project plan’ • ‘We can focus on how to merge our portfolio management’ • ‘We need to have a governance in place for our initiative’
Relations	The degree to which decision-making, on the basis of authority, discursive legitimacy and/or resources, is centralized or distributed (Purdy, 2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘What is on the agenda is up to us’ • ‘That is not the case for our inhabitants’ • ‘We have secured funding for the next steps’

Note(s): Adapted from Couture et al. (2023)
Source(s): Authors’ own creation

network of local, regional and national infrastructure operators, many of which expressed interest in (the prospect of) interorganizational strategy.

The case was selected following initial meetings with representatives of a regional government in the Netherlands in October 2023, during which the societal challenge of bridge renovation and renewal was discussed. We learned of plans to establish a new strategic initiative aimed at improving coordination among infrastructure operators and remained in contact for research purposes. In November 2023, the initiative was formally named “Collaborating for Smarter Renovation and Renewal” (CSRR), with activities scheduled to commence in 2024.

3.3 Case description

CSRR emerged from a shared recognition among practitioners and policymakers that infrastructure operators needed to develop a longer-term strategic perspective and better coordinate their activities. In the region, more than 40 infrastructure operators were individually responsible for their own bridge inventories, resulting in a high degree of organizational autonomy. While this autonomy allowed for localized decision-making, it also constrained collaborative responses to shared challenges such as planning uncertainty and resource scarcity.

Establishing a new intergovernmental entity proved politically sensitive and remained highly contested. As a result, informal and horizontal forms of interorganizational strategy emerged. CSRR launched on April 3rd, 2024, with the first of a series of taskforce meetings attended by representatives of local governments, the national road- and waterway operator and the regional government. A representative of the national rail operator joined from September 2024 onwards.

Taskforce meetings were held approximately every three weeks and were complemented by workshops and other meetings organized by external firms. Meeting locations rotated across municipalities to foster a shared sense of purpose. While the region offered substantial potential for interorganizational strategy due to its dense infrastructure network, the historically siloed structures and practices meant that the process unfolded amid considerable uncertainty.

3.4 Collection of case data

Data collection began in October 2023 with an exploratory meeting and continued throughout the initiative. Prior to the formal launch of CSRR, we viewed a webinar in December 2023 (meant to discuss the societal challenge and announce the upcoming initiative) and conducted 14 semi-structured interviews in February–March 2024 with key representatives from local governments ($n = 6$), the regional government ($n = 6$), the national road- and waterway operator ($n = 1$) and a major construction firm ($n = 1$). Several interviewees later participated directly in the taskforce meetings.

Following the launch of CSRR, the first author attended 14 consecutive taskforce meetings (approximately two hours each), four workshops (two to three hours each) and one stakeholder event attended by representatives of 23 organizations. All taskforce meetings were audio-recorded and detailed field notes were taken during workshops and events. In addition, we collected internal documents such as agendas, minutes and memos, as well as approximately 30 public documents including policy reports and news articles. Table 2 and Figure 1 provide an overview of the primary data sources.

3.5 Data analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative and interpretive process. In the first round of coding, we applied abductive coding using Atlas.ti, guided by the three analytical layers as sensitizing categories. This round focused on identifying relevant fragments related to interpretation, structure and relations across inter- and intraorganizational levels.

In a second round, we developed 18 empirical categories that captured recurring themes in the interorganizational strategy process (see Appendix). The categories were derived through iterative engagement with the data, informed by prior literature but grounded in

Table 2. Overview primary data. LG, RG, RWO and RO: local governments, regional government, national road- and waterway operator and national rail operator. TFM: taskforce meeting

Source	Recording (min)	# Of people	Attendance			
			LG	RG	RWO	RO
Introductory meeting CSRR	n/a	8		✓	✓	
Webinar I	55	135	✓	✓	✓	
Interviews (14 in total)	2,200 (in total)	14	✓	✓	✓	
TFM 1	120	12	✓	✓	✓	
TFM 2	120	17	✓	✓	✓	
TFM 3	110	13	✓	✓	✓	
Webinar II	60	85	✓	✓	✓	
TFM 4	110	11	✓	✓	✓	
TFM 5	110	16	✓	✓	✓	
TFM 6 (i.e. workshop A)	120	13	✓	✓	✓	
TFM 7	120	10	✓	✓	✓	
TFM 8	100	13	✓	✓	✓	✓
TFM 9	80	14	✓	✓	✓	✓
Stakeholder event (by CSRR)	n/a	150	✓	✓	✓	✓
TFM 10 (i.e. workshop B1)	220	16	✓	✓	✓	✓
TFM 11	120	18	✓	✓	✓	✓
Workshop B2	n/a	15	✓	✓	✓	✓
TFM 12	120	12	✓	✓	✓	✓
TFM 13	120	17	✓	✓	✓	✓
TFM 14	60	19	✓	✓	✓	✓
Workshop B3	n/a	13	✓	✓	✓	✓

Source(s): Authors' own creation

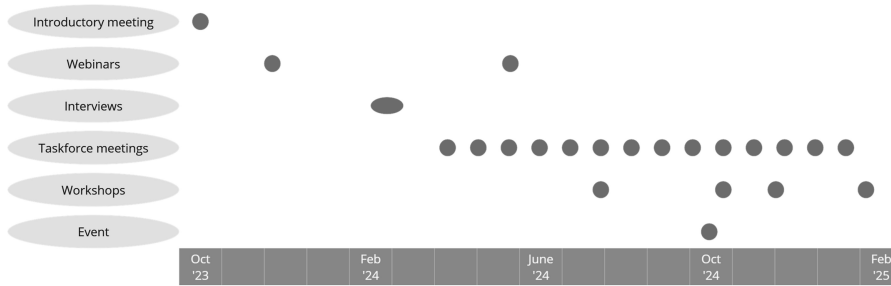


Figure 1. Visual representation of primary data sources. *Source:* Authors' own work

recurring patterns observed across the empirical material. Since coding was conducted by a single researcher embedded in the field, we took additional steps to ensure analytical rigor and reflexivity. We focused on systematic comparison across meetings, interviews and documents, iterative comparison between empirical material, analytical layers and emerging challenges, and repeated discussion of interpretations with co-authors. As we developed a layered case description (see Section 4), relationships within and across layers became increasingly apparent. These patterns were subsequently consolidated into three key cross-level strategizing challenges: joint goal setting, shared ownership and pacing (see Section 5).

To enhance the credibility of the analysis, a near-final version of the manuscript was shared with taskforce members as part of the informed consent procedure. Participants were invited to review how the initiative and their contributions were represented. Feedback from several respondents confirmed that the analysis captured the main challenges, and no substantive inaccuracies were identified. A visual overview of the analysis process is presented in Figure 2.

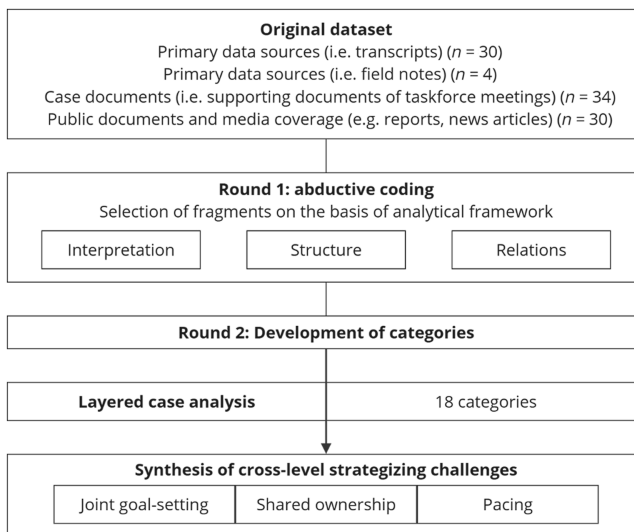


Figure 2. Visual representation of the analysis process. *Source:* Authors' own work

4. Case results

4.1 Interpretation

On October 5th 2023, a roundtable discussion between infrastructure operators was held. This would later be referred to as the preliminary kick-off of CSRR. It was estimated that the regional bridge inventory totaled over 10,000 bridges (ranging from small cycling and pedestrian bridges to large movable bridges) and that the vast majority were owned and operated by local governments. Moreover, many bridges in the region were believed to be nearing their end-of-life (due to post-WW II rebuilding efforts). However, a structured and reliable overview of the inventory was lacking.

In December 2023, a key representative of the regional government (we refer to Bob) held a webinar to discuss the renovation and renewal of bridges. Bob was the *de facto* face of the initiative and initially presented the initiative from a more technical point of view. He noted during the webinar: “When you look at what we have to do, then it is actually not that strange. It’s basically asset management that we have to do. What is out there, what is the status of an object and what is a wise strategy?”

During February–March 2024, we interviewed 14 organizational representatives (see Section 3.4) involved in CSRR. Some had recently joined preliminary roundtable discussions. Many interviewees noted that the dialogue so far had been productive, focused on common ground, albeit based on surface-level consensus. Yet, we also noted one reference to a more contentious meeting where different views on the problem, particularly regarding the current state of bridges, clashed. Multiple interviewees described infrastructure as “long-term” and “societal,” yet also stated point-blank that “*the* societal challenge doesn’t exist”, implying that societal challenges are multiple and context-dependent. Indeed, some local governments didn’t know how many bridges they had for example, while others felt they had no vested interest in CSSR. When we asked about the rationale of CSSR, we noticed a stark contrast between more abstract mission statements (stressing *the* societal challenge) and concrete deliverables. This contrast reflected differences between how participants framed the initiative collectively and how they assessed its relevance within their own organizations.

When the taskforce commenced, its supporting documents stated that the purpose of the roundtable was to “jointly determine which opportunities to pursue”. But in the following months, there was no clear focus on either shared problem perceptions or joint goal setting. The purpose and pacing of work on a collaboration agreement and position paper increased the level of ambiguity that participants experienced. This was picked up on by Bob, who, in May 2024, organized a new webinar on CSRR in which he explicitly acknowledged the difficulties in finding common ground in the initiative (see Figure 3: a slide of the presentation held during the webinar, with mention of the need to switch between substance, processes and relationships during strategizing). Moreover, there was also a noticeable shift in the core message of CSRR, which now focused more on regional accessibility and the “link between



Figure 3. Adapted visual representation of slide from presentation used in Webinar II (May 2024). Source: Authors’ own work

asset management, traffic – and area management”. During the fifth taskforce meeting (June 2024) several taskforce members voiced criticism on the way of working, right after the position paper had been finished. Several representatives admitted that the position paper “didn’t feel like it was theirs”. The idea of developing a collaboration agreement had by this time been abandoned. This illustrates that the newly formed taskforce was encountering several challenges that all required attention.

Taskforce meeting 6 (July 2024) was a workshop hosted by a firm (we refer to firm A and workshop A). The aim was to “discuss CSRR and the role of the taskforce” and “prioritize initiatives”. During the workshop, goals proposed by taskforce members were clustered into three themes: (1) “the inventory approach” (see also the next subsection), (2) a better link between asset management and traffic management and (3) a new forum for informal meetings between infrastructure operators. The host subsequently asked which participants would adopt each of these. Several representatives then stepped forward and so three main goals were jointly established. Yet, at this stage, the outcome of CSRR was highly uncertain. Near the start of the workshop, one of the bigger local governments admitted doubt to the first author about their continued involvement in CSRR, reasoning that the “added value was not yet clear” and contending that “if our main aim is accessibility, than there are other collaborations for that already”. However, “the space for joint goal setting” led the organization to stay. Continued participation thus depended on whether emerging collective goals could be connected to intra-organizational priorities.

On October 23rd 2024 CSRR hosted a stakeholder event, which granted the taskforce members an opportunity to share the developments of each of the three main goals with a wider audience (not in the least members of their own organization). Around this time, the discussions in the taskforce meetings turned more toward monitoring the developments. There were more traces of explicit disagreements, where actors engaged in dialogue more deeply, in the workshops of firm B (we refer to workshops B1-3). The proposed idea was that firm B would help with structuring the initiative. Yet the first such workshop still displayed limited explicit disagreement (October 2024). Later, several participants expressed an interest in more specificity regarding for example the purpose and scope of the initiative. This was realized in workshops B2 and B3 (see also the next subsection).

In December 2024, a presentation on the status of the first main goal (i.e. inventory approach) was given during taskforce meeting 12. The inventory approach aimed to “support the development of strategic asset management”, for example by “sorting and grouping bridges with similar characteristics into families of objects”. During the meeting, an updated overview of the collective bridge inventory was displayed on a geographical map, with the bridges grouped by structural category. However, these categories were not yet clearly defined, which sparked some dialogue among infrastructure operators about characteristics of the collective inventory. This led to the realization that the participants were looking beyond their own inventory, after which several participants noted: “this is CSSR in a nutshell”.

In conclusion, we find that no actor made a concentrated effort to present or discuss problems in greater detail during taskforce meetings. Traces of joint problem exploration were observed in workshops, though not very deliberately. Explicit disagreement was primarily focused on shared goals (or the lack thereof). One of the recurring themes was the link between asset management and traffic management, specifically, which should take precedence and how much weight should be given to each. While the second main goal (established in taskforce meeting 6) sought to merge both approaches, discussions on this issue persisted throughout the strategy process. There was ongoing consensus on two key points; the need to anticipate the societal challenge of renovating and renewing the collective bridge inventory and the importance of a long-term perspective.

4.2 Structure

When the taskforce launched, the chairmanship was fulfilled by a firm (we refer to firm C). During the meeting, the chairman asked whether anyone would be interested to take over this role (in the future). This issue was raised again at the next taskforce meeting. However, no participant stepped forward. One local government reasoned that it could make their intraorganizational strategizing more challenging. Firm C then, chaired 14 consecutive taskforce meetings. Also at the first taskforce meeting, multiple participants asked questions about the current organization of CSRR.

Soon after the taskforce launch, we recorded the first mention of a project-based idea (May 2024). The idea was to focus on a localized area within the region as a prototype to showcase the added value of CSRR. The taskforce continued to focus on this area of interest, believing to be of high potential as a prototype, and worked toward concrete deliverables. For example, taskforce meeting 9 and 11 discussed the project idea extensively, and taskforce meeting 14 was almost entirely devoted to its progress (see Figure 4). During taskforce meeting 13 (January 2025), Bob remarked that asking local governments to join a project as part of CSRR would be “too soon”. A more feasible timeframe would be within “the next 6 months”.

As Figure 4 shows, the project idea was linked to all three main goals of CSRR. The co-evolution of goals and organization, however, also created ambiguities. For example, at the fifth taskforce meeting, there had been open discussion on (the lack of) joint goal setting and how CSRR could improve this. Bob noted: “Today, I’m noticing tension as well – for example, when we support infrastructure operators in taking the next steps based on spontaneously set goals, without the taskforce’s involvement”. Also after workshop A, the organization of joint goals continued to raise questions. This was particularly the case for the second goal (the link between asset management and traffic management), since most local governments had separate departments that each had their own discipline. A document (written in September 2024) which linked the three main goals to the earlier mentioned position paper illustrated the efforts to create more clarity.

When taskforce meeting 9 (October 2024) commenced, the structure of the taskforce had undergone a striking transformation. A chart of CSRR was projected, which referred to the three main goals as “implementation plans”. Above the three plans was the “team implementation”, led by a firm (we refer to firm D). It was stated that from the next regular taskforce meeting onwards (11), the “implementation manager” would present the progress, challenges and support needs of all three plans.

The following taskforce meeting (10) was workshop B1. As noted in the previous subsection, the workshops triggered more explicit disagreements, even at the expense of firm B’s workshop design. Especially during B2 and B3, the space for open-ended discussions sparked debate. One local government in B2 reasoned that CSRR, as an organization, had been elevated as *the* goal, and more effort was needed to sharpen the focus on substance. Still,

Organization	Goal I	Goal II	Goal III
	✓	✓	✓
	✓	○	○
	■	○	○
	■	○	○
	■	○	○
	✓	✓	✓
	■	✓	✓
	✓	✓	✓
	■	○	○
	■	○	○
	■	✓	✓

Figure 4. Adapted visual representation of project-based idea status. Taken from supporting document of taskforce meeting 14 (January 2025). Source: Authors’ own work

workshop B3 focused on the organizational aspects of CSRR. Topics that were brought up included projects, shared portfolio management and the organization of CSRR itself. When the notion of shared portfolio management resurfaced, one of the taskforce members noted that they had decided to move away from this term due to the negative response it elicited. The dialogue then turned toward the main structural challenge, the design of CSRR as an informal organization. However, the word “network” was used interchangeably to describe roads- and waterways, a governance structure and/or a decision-making process. This made it more difficult to reach a shared understanding of the current and desired CSRR structure, also because there were multiple, new representatives that had only just joined. To help guide the diverging dialogue, firm B started to draw out the current structure. However, the new structural formula of CSRR mentioned earlier was given limited attention. So, when disagreements about the drawing led one of the taskforce members to walk up to the flipchart, use a new sheet and draw the current structure again, the workshop reached increasingly profound levels of ambiguity (see Figure 5).

It can be concluded that CSRR – and, by extension, the interorganizational strategy process – morphed in purpose and structure. During the initial stages of the initiative, the predominant focus was indeed organizational (e.g. setting up the taskforce and writing the collaboration agreement) and over the course of a year, the taskforce took on different forms, including a project team, an overarching program structure, an expert panel and an event committee. We find that multiple actors made deliberate efforts to untangle the development of joint goals from the emerging organization. However, this proved to be challenging. Indeed, we found that the vast majority of explicit disagreement concerned a mixture of goals and organizations. The workshops were designed to facilitate more dialogue, but as the outcome of B3 shows, only limited explicit disagreement emerged, and the organization of CSRR remained highly ambiguous.

4.3 Relations

The formation of CSRR can be traced back to an informal meeting in early 2023 between Bob and the regional government, in which new types of organization were considered (incl.

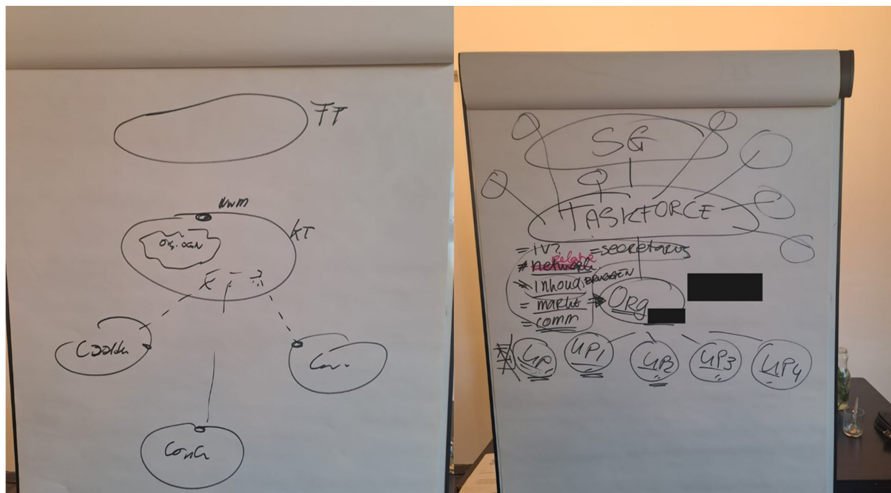


Figure 5. Side-by-side overview of two separate drawings of CSRR’s current structure. Left side was made by firm B and right side was made by a local government. Pictures taken during workshop B3 (February 2025). Source: Authors’ own work

roundtables and agreements) to improve long-term coordination. Then, after email attempts had fallen flat, Bob prioritized face-to-face discussions with infrastructure operators. Next, Bob set up the CSRR initiative and its roundtable meetings from scratch. However, many operators struggled to find sufficient time. As a result, Bob hired a consortium of firms C-D in February 2024 to provide additional management capacity. They added two supporting documents to the agenda of the first taskforce meeting to explain the purpose and structure of CSRR. The assignment to establish CSRR was never formalized in writing.

Bob, along with a colleague and representatives of firms C-D, formed the “core team”. Being “core team” members allowed them to devote more time and work at a much faster pace on CSRR than, for example, the representatives of local governments. However, this created a conundrum: the lack of synchronization made distributed decision-making more difficult. The taskforce meetings rapidly evolved into updating sessions rather than meetings of a central governing body, or even the sounding board, it was originally intended to be. Then in webinar II Bob noted that “currently we are placing a strong emphasis on the relationships” (see also Figure 3). He continued: “Sometimes you have to focus on the content, and then you think, wait, we actually need to pay a bit more attention to the relationship, because there might be some people who are withdrawing.”. Around this time, the actors started exploring more distributed forms of decision-making. However, such a process demanded significant time. For example, multiple representatives were also focused on the attitudes toward CSRR in their own organizations. One local government wondered (October 2024): “How do you ensure that it [CSRR] is more widely supported and not seen by colleagues as ‘my’ club?”. There was a noticeable shift in the attitudes toward CSRR after the stakeholder event, which sparked significant interest among colleagues from all four types of infrastructure operators.

By early 2025, CSRR was navigating between the interests of 4 different infrastructure operators, 25 organizations in total. Around this time, we recorded the first mention of co-financing (between 3 types of infrastructure operators). Gradually, more actors participated in decision-making, while more infrastructure operators became part of the core team. However,

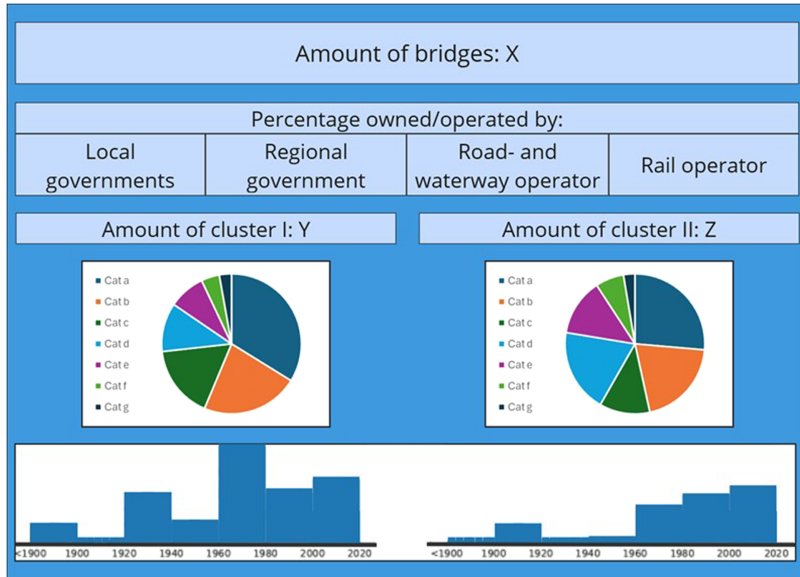


Figure 6. Adapted visual representation of the ongoing analysis on the collective bridge inventory. Based on supporting documents of taskforce meeting 14 (January 2025). *Source:* Authors’ own work

it was still unclear what this meant for decision-making on the collective bridge inventory (see Figure 6). Bob himself, through intended actions and emergent patterns, had become a de facto authority figure, which led to unexpected relational challenges. For example, would CSRR, as an informal organization, respond to ad hoc support request from local policy makers, regardless of their alignment with CSRR's emerging purpose? When Bob was suddenly faced with this question, he decided to leave it be. Then, when he shared his experience in workshop B2, his decision was scrutinized by fellow taskforce members. One local government reasoned that it was a missed opportunity for joint goal setting. This indicates that there were lingering ambiguities around the commitment to more distributed decision-making in the CSRR initiative.

In conclusion, the analysis highlights the evolving nature of decision-making within CSRR. Initially, it was highly decentralized, with Bob leading exploratory efforts and gradually forming a centralized core team. As the process unfolded, the distance between the pace of the core team and the broader group of participants grew. An important issue was the significant time required for most participants to navigate the nexus between inter- and intraorganizational strategy. In addition, while Bob rejected a formal authority role, he became a de facto leader, which created relational challenges as well. Decision-making grew into more emergent forms after the three main goals had been adopted by participants. However, ambiguities over decision-making (e.g. joint goal setting or the appraisal of periodic results) persisted, as evidenced by explicit disagreements on CSRR's purpose and structure (see also previous subsections). Ultimately, the initiative navigated between centralized and emergent leadership, while the structures of CSRR remained fluid.

Taken together, the analysis of interpretation, structure and relations shows that decision-making challenges of CSRR did not occur within a single layer, nor at a single point in time. Instead, challenges repeatedly emerged at the nexus of interorganizational collaboration and intraorganizational considerations. Across the three layers, similar tensions surfaced in different forms and moments, suggesting a set of recurring cross-level challenges that shaped the trajectory of the strategy process. In the next section, we synthesize these observations by identifying and conceptualizing three key cross-level strategizing challenges.

5. Discussion

We identified three cross-level strategizing challenges that shaped the trajectory of the strategy process, namely joint goal setting, shared ownership and pacing. Further in the text, we theorize each challenge as a dynamic across organizational levels and then reflect on what this implies for understanding interorganizational strategy processes more broadly.

5.1 Joint goal setting as an alignment challenge across levels

The first challenge, joint goal setting, concerns the difficulty of establishing and sustaining shared strategic goals while actor representatives remain embedded in their own organizational rationales. In CSRR, joint goal setting did not follow a linear trajectory from problem definition to goal agreement. Instead, the space for joint goal setting expanded and contracted over time, influenced by the co-evolution of shifting interpretations, morphing initiative structures and evolving forms of decision-making.

At the interorganizational level, CSRR was framed as a response to a shared societal challenge: the renovation and renewal of a collective bridge inventory. At the intraorganizational level, however, this challenge was interpreted through diverse lenses such as asset management, accessibility, political accountability or operational feasibility. As a result, what appeared as a *means* to joint strategizing at one level (e.g. position paper, inventory approach) was often treated as an *end* at another level. This misalignment repeatedly complicated attempts to articulate clear joint goals.

Crucially, joint goal setting was entangled with questions about the organizational status of CSRR itself. Therefore, many attempts at joint goals (e.g. focusing on a specific category of bridges) could be at odds with the transformation of the initiative itself (e.g. link between asset management and traffic management). This illustrates a key cross-level dynamic: goal ambiguity was not merely interpretative but strongly organizational, due to endemic tensions between interorganizational collaboration and intraorganizational considerations. Joint goal setting thus functioned less as a foundational step and more as an ongoing negotiation across levels.

5.2 Shared ownership as continuing provisional engagement across levels

The second challenge, shared ownership, refers to the willingness and capacity of actors to develop a sense of collective responsibility for both the strategic orientation and organization of the strategy process. While shared ownership is often treated as a precondition for effective collaboration, our findings suggest that it emerged unevenly and episodically, through moments of explicit disagreement rather than consensus.

In CSRR, explicit disagreement, particularly around the organization of the initiative, played a pivotal role in the emergence of shared ownership. Periods of apparent harmony were often characterized by surface-level agreement and limited engagement, whereas moments of explicit disagreement prompted actors to clarify viewpoints, voice concerns and re-evaluate their commitment. Notably, such dialogue did not lead to withdrawal but often strengthened actors' willingness to remain involved.

Shared ownership was not a stable attribute of the collaboration. Actors repeatedly reassessed whether CSRR felt like "their" initiative, balancing collective ambitions against intraorganizational responsibilities and capacities. This highlights a key insight: shared ownership required a delicate balancing effort, as actors had to simultaneously legitimize their engagement both within the collaborative setting and within their own organizations. Shared ownership thus appears less as a prerequisite than as an emergent foothold following sustained engagement with cross-level tensions.

5.3 Pacing as a temporal challenge across levels

The third challenge, pacing, concerns the difficulty of synchronizing the tempo of strategizing across actors with differing priorities, decision-making cycles and capacities. From the early stages of CSRR, it became evident that actors could not contribute at the same pace. Some were able to devote substantial time and move quickly, while others faced significant intraorganizational constraints.

Consequently, pacing affected not only participation but also influence, subtly redistributing authority within the strategy process. Faster-moving actors, most notably the core team, shaped the agenda and strategic orientation of the initiative, sometimes unintentionally creating distance from other actor representatives. At the same time, many representatives required time to build internal support, secure mandates and manage expectations within their own organizations.

This temporal misalignment generated recurring tensions. Developments at the interorganizational level could outpace intraorganizational efforts, making representatives feel out of sync and complicating their boundary-spanning role. Pacing therefore highlights the delicate nature of situated efforts at cutting across inter- and intraorganizational levels.

5.4 The dynamics of cross-level challenges

Taken together, these challenges invite a shift in thinking about interorganizational strategy: from a problem of designing the "linking pin" to a recognition of the processual nature of cross-level challenges. The findings show how various actors are constantly enacting, negotiating and reconfiguring strategizing challenges across levels. This perspective

complements and extends existing work on interorganizational strategy, public management and network governance by making the cross-level nature of strategizing explicit.

This means that actors engaged in interorganizational strategy processes are rarely encountering isolated decision-making problems. Instead, they encounter challenges across levels that do not disappear once addressed. Often, the alignment between actors would not solve the alignment within actors, or vice versa, which underscores the recursive nature of interorganizational strategizing (Deken *et al.*, 2018).

Cross-level challenges appear to intensify when (1) joint goals remain overly ambiguous, (2) there is a prolonged lack of explicit disagreement and (3) the interorganizational level outpaces the intraorganizational level or vice versa. Furthermore, cross-level challenges appear to diminish when they are explicitly engaged with and partially untangled from each other. Indeed, joint goal setting, shared ownership and pacing, while analytically distinct, were often intertwined. For example, a lack of ownership was linked to pacing problems, which in turn contracted the space for joint goal setting. This explains why multiple challenges are often experienced together in practice and why untangling them is considered important.

5.5 Informal strategy to tackle societal challenges

This study examined an instance of interorganizational strategy. Below, we reflect on the implications of this study for the broader class of informal and horizontal interorganizational strategy processes addressing a complex societal challenge.

First, while the CSRR initiative was never formalized in writing, it operated alongside, and was partially entangled with, formal governance arrangements. This begs the question to what degree informal strategy can complement formalized processes. Our findings indicate that informal strategy processes are not necessarily more harmonious than their formal counterparts. A lack of joint problem exploration for example heightened ambiguities across organizational levels and limited the understanding of the societal challenge the infrastructure operators aimed to solve (see Section 4.1). Yet, in a domain historically characterized by siloed structures and autonomous actors, CSRR was arguably still more consequential than any formal approach could have been. This signals the importance of persistent, structural ambiguity (see Section 4.2), and its entanglement with interpretive ambiguity, in better understanding the broader class of strategy processes (Couture *et al.*, 2023; Nathues *et al.*, 2021; Deken *et al.*, 2018).

Secondly, while CSRR (the initiative) may transform, formalize or dissolve, the interorganizational strategy process persists across these organizational forms. This suggests that interorganizational strategizing should be understood as a process that is not reducible to the maturation or formalization of a particular initiative or network structure. As a result, cross-level challenges identified here are not expected to disappear as the initiative reaches higher levels of maturity, though they may intensify and/or diminish over time. In this way, the processual view complements existing studies on network-level development, by explicating the cross-level nature of interorganizational strategizing (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2020).

Finally, the findings indicate that path dependencies can play an important role in the broader class of strategy processes. Examples include the long life cycle of assets and public accountability structures. These characteristics influenced how cross-level challenges were experienced (rather than introducing entirely different ones), suggesting that the three challenges identified here may transfer across domains, albeit in different forms.

6. Conclusions

Our research question was: “What are key cross-level strategizing challenges that organizations engaged in an interorganizational strategy process encounter?” Over the

course of a year, this study observed how, across inter- and intraorganizational levels, actors engaged in a strategy process to address a shared societal challenge. Based on a layered analytical approach, we highlight three key cross-level strategizing challenges: joint goal setting, shared ownership and pacing. By making the cross-level nature of strategizing explicit, we offer new perspectives on how interorganizational strategy processes unfold and how actors try to navigate persistent tensions and ambiguities. Below, we reflect on the limitations of this study and provide recommendations for theory and practice.

This study has several limitations. First, while the focus on the early formation of CSRR allowed for rich insights, it limits our ability to examine how such challenges re-emerge when the initiative transforms, formalizes or dissolves. Second, path-dependent features of the infrastructural domain played an important role in how cross-level challenges recurred (see also Section 5.5). While we argue that similar challenges may appear across domains, their specific manifestations are likely to vary across organizational and institutional contexts.

Our findings suggest that future research would benefit from treating cross-level challenges as a central object of analysis, rather than as a background condition. Adopting a processual perspective opens up new avenues for theorizing how such challenges intensify or diminish. Future studies using process tracing or comparative designs could examine how actors deliberately try to stabilize interorganizational strategy processes during critical moments, and under what conditions such stabilization is feasible (Bansal *et al.*, 2022; Hilbolling *et al.*, 2021; Diriker *et al.*, 2022). For example, when does explicit disagreement contribute to shared ownership rather than disengagement? Future research could also examine actors' capacity to strategize across levels, from an organizational and institutional perspective (Goldschmeding *et al.*, 2025; Berthod and Segato, 2019).

Illustratively, in CSRR, a period of intensified cross-level challenges a few months after the initiative's launch provided such a critical moment. Subsequent decision-making created space to align goals, continue provisional engagement and recalibrate pace, showing that stabilization is achieved temporarily rather than conclusively.

For practitioners, we stress that persistent cross-level challenges should not be interpreted as a sign of failure, but as an inherent feature of interorganizational strategy. We propose viewing these challenges as interpretive lenses that help actors make sense of re-emerging tensions and ambiguities across levels. Such lenses provide diagnostic cues for when and how the strategy process may require temporary stabilization. For example, prolonged superficial alignment may intensify tensions around joint goal setting or shared ownership, while pacing tensions can become particularly salient when interorganizational developments outpace intraorganizational sensemaking, as discussed in Section 5.4. Facilitating more open discussion (e.g. through specially designed workshops) appears to help with untangling cross-level challenges, while also providing more space for content-driven exploration apart from recurring discussions on governance designs. Finally, considering not only actors' willingness but also their ability to participate appears to help with temporal alignment. However, due to the nature of these challenges, alignment between actors is only part of the puzzle. Moreover, rather than focusing on the design of a "linking pin" to resolve tensions, efforts to sustain strategizing require an ongoing orientation toward common ground across levels.

Table A1. Coding overview

Code label	Code description
<i>Interpretation</i>	
Explicit disagreement on shared problems	At least two actors engage in (or one makes reference to) explicit disagreement focused on shared problem perceptions (or the lack thereof)
Explicit disagreement on shared goals	At least two actors engage in (or one makes reference to) explicit disagreement focused on shared goals (or the lack thereof)
Lack of dialogue on problems/ goals	At least one actor raises an issue and what follows is little to no dialogue
Sharing a (concrete) problem	One or more actors share a (concrete) problem perception
Sharing a (concrete) goal	One or more actors share a (concrete) goal
The societal challenge	One or more actor bring up the importance of one or more societal challenges
<i>Structure</i>	
Explicit disagreement on organization	At least two actor engage in (or one makes reference to) explicit disagreement focused on organization (or the lack thereof)
Lack of dialogue on organization	At least one actor raises an issue around organization and what follows is little to no dialogue
Project idea	One or more actors raise a project-based idea
Project updates	One or more actors share updates on a project-based idea
Shared portfolios	One or more actors bring up the idea of shared portfolios
Organization of the initiative itself	One or more actors bring up the organization of the initiative itself
New types of organization	One or more actors bring up the importance of new types of organization
<i>Relations</i>	
Forcing an outlook	One or more actors set a (new) (concrete) problem perception
Forcing a goal	One or more actors set a (new) (concrete) goal
Forcing a structure	One or more actors set (a new form of) organization
Resource scarcity	One or more actors bring up resource scarcity (physical capital, human capital, organizational capital) of the involved actors
Need for more resources	One or more actors bring up additional resources (physical capital, human capital, organizational capital) for the involved actors

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