

The Milieu in Infrastructure Projects from Contractors' Perspective

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Abstract : The purpose of this paper is to understand – relationship development – in a local network of business and non-business actors named the milieu. Two cases from our cross-sectional qualitative data to emphasize the logical importance of milieu for contractors involved in the business of construction are reported here. It is suggested on the basis of case analysis that competitors should be included in the milieu and showcase how such a milieu can be used for decision-making in the theory and practice of project marketing. The paper suggest that relational development serves as a trigger for functional development rather than functional development being a trigger to relational development.

Keywords : *Functional Development; Relational Development; Relationship, Milieu; Competitors, Project Marketing.*

INTRODUCTION

The focus of traditional approaches to project marketing had been on the stakeholders themselves, without taking into account the relationships between them. Stakeholders are a group of people who do not interact or build relationships, but share similar roles from the point of view of project marketing: for example, investor, owner, sponsor, consumer groups. In contrast, the theory of industrial networks deals with stakeholders from the standpoint of emphasizing relationships among all rather than immediate players in the exchange (Håkansson, 1987; Mattsson, 1985). Project marketers describe this collective body as a milieu as it acts as a microcosm in which network forces play, reinforce and empower by spatial and cultural proximity (Cova, Mazet and Salle, 1996).

The word 'milieu' has been derived from 'le lieu', which means 'place' or 'spot', and therefore ,milieu means the notion between two places. In its original notion, the word 'milieu' is the French equivalent for 'ether' or 'medium'. In this physical sense 'milieu' became a metaphor for any exterior environment through which an organism's body could be affected, and vice versa, through which an organism could move and 'expand', for example, water is the 'milieu' in which fish move. The term was then developed in French social sciences, which refers to the unique configurations of

situations for individual actions that are constantly changing in the interplay between human beings and their environments.

As a project is understood to be a complex transaction covering a package of products, services, and work specifically designed to create capital assets that produce benefits for a buyer over an extended time-period (Cova, Ghauri, ' Salle, 2002), the term 'milieu' often denotes all the socio-economic exchanges involved in the activity of project marketing. Therefore, the term 'milieu' can be defined as a socio-spatial entity that is geographically bound and in which, through the frequency of socio-economic exchanges, business and non-business players are intertwined to share a common vision of the business and a set of tacit rules – the 'law of milieu'. For the present study, we consider milieu as defined by Cova, Mazet, ' Salle(1996): "Socio-spatial configuration that can be characterized by four elements: namely, a territory, a network of heterogeneous actors related to each other within this territory, a representation constructed and shared by these actors, and a set of rules and norms ("the law of the milieu) regulating the interactions between these actors . In general, dimensions for such a milieu can be limited by the notion of economic space of relationship, which comprises cooperative relationships developed hierarchically in a functional and geographical space.

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GETTING STARTED (REVIEW OF LITERATURE)

As the project business involving construction contracting is networked, it is the norm that individual project-based firms complement their own resource base with resources controlled by other cooperative firms in their environment by the mechanism of trust-building (Chow, Cheung, & Chan, 2012). Such contracts are written legal and formal agreements that establish the rights and obligations of each party. Debate continues over the nature of the construction industry as a conglomeration of project business characterized by demand of a discontinuous nature, uniqueness and complexity (Fellows & Liu, 2017).

These characteristics of project business have implications for the development of inter-organizational relationships following the 'law of milieu' in project contexts (Ahola, Kujala, Laaksonen, & Aaltonen, 2013). Establishing such a cooperative network not including competitors has emerged as a strategy for contractors to improve their business competitiveness (Keung & Shen, 2017). Of late, Lieftink, Smits, & Lauche (2019) have recommended for collaboration with competitors in the milieu of contracting firms to mobilize key stakeholders in a contractual construction business and sustain its future growth opportunities. But, Ahola, Kujala, Laaksonen, & Aaltonen (2013), and Loosemore, Braham, Yiming, & Bronkhorst (2020) have highlighted the emerging prominence of a relationship-based approach to inter-organizational relationships in the execution of construction project business without including competitors to focus on cooperation among project stakeholders.

Project-based firms in construction business continuously balance their short term interests of developing contractual economic incentives and close monitoring of parties against their long term interests of both functional and relationship development (Anvuur, Kumaraswamy & Mahesh, 2011). The functional development is meant to map the interactions with key actors to maintain the potential offer of the time when matching resources and capabilities to identify what can be done in a competitive project situation (Prakash & Phadtare, 2019). The relational development is meant to map the interactions with key actors to approach clients before

competitors through social linkages of interpersonal relations based on customer intimacy in a competitive project situation (Prakash, & Phadtare, 2019). In this regard, Cova, Ghauri, & Salle (2002) have described project marketing as an activity that is carried out by coalitions of project-based firms interconnected by inter-organizational relationships. This is a popular view of project marketing, which aims to develop a specific milieu-based approach by contractors to create a competitive advantage and win the contract (Prakash & Phadtare, 2019). Usually, the milieu includes all players grouped along two lines, namely, business actors such as consultants, financial institutions, agents, engineering companies, contractors, sub-contractors, etc., and non-business actors such as governments, syndicates, lobbies, unions, pressure groups, activists, etc.

To establish gaps in the literature covering stakeholders and their relationships as the milieu for communication in project marketing using Google Scholar, only a few peer-reviewed journal papers were found suitable based on the appraisal of abstracts, namely, Cova, Mazet, & Salle (1994, 1996), and Welch, Welch, Wilkinson, & Young (1996). Among these suitable studies, Cova, Mazet, & Salle (1996) has been found highest cited in Google Scholar even today. As few studies are covering this theme, the present study attempts to review those studies, where Cova, Mazet, & Salle (1996) were found to be highly cited by judgmental relevance in Google Scholar chronologically for 16 years between 2006 and 2021. Accordingly, this study has reviewed (Study 01) Cova & Salle, 2006; (Study 02) Salminen & Möller, 2006; (Study 03) Tikkanen, Kujala, & Artto, 2007; (Study 04) Cova & Salle, 2008; (Study 05) Lehtimäki, Simula, & Salo, 2009; (Study 06) Jalkala, Cova, Salle, & Salminen, 2010; (Study 07) Aaltonen, 2011; (Study 08) Alajoutsijärvi, Mainela, Salminen, & Ulkuniemi, 2012; (Study 09) Prior, 2013; (Study 10) Correia & Brito, 2014; (Study 11) Crespín-Mazet, Havenvid, & Linné, 2015; (Study 12) Razmdoost & Mills, 2016; (Study 13) Goulart Szejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017; (STUDY 14) Aarikka-Stenroos, Aaboen, Cova, & Rolfsen, 2018; (Study 15) Crespín-Mazet, Romestant, & Salle, 2019; (Study 16) Romestant, 2020; and (Study 17) Galli, Bongo, Yamagishi, & Ocampo, 2021. Note

that Study stands for studies in 'stakeholders and their relationships as the milieu for communication in project marketing', where milieu has been understood to be a pertinent unit of analysis in project marketing. These studies involving milieu have been chronologically serialized from 01 to 17. These arguably suitable studies are arranged chronologically in *Table 1* to focus on progress related to a total of 42 issues.

Out of these 42 issues, the first 21 issues related to mapping the presence of specific stakeholder in the milieu of contracting firms in *Table 1*, which are consultants (Issue01), financing institutions (Issue02), owners (Issue 03), consumer groups (Issue04), agents (Issue05), engineering companies (Issue06), third-party agencies (Issue 07), public institutions (Issue08), regulatory bodies (Issue 09), bank (Issue 10), customer (Issue 11), subsidiary (Issue 12), suppliers (Issue 13), sub-contractors (Issue 14), governments (Issue 15), syndicates (Issue 16), lobbies (Issue 17), unions (Issue 18), pressure groups (Issue 19), activists (Issue 20), and competitors of contracting firms (Issue 21). This review has attempted to cross-check other discussed issues in the selected studies as well like competitors in the market of project business (Issue 22), classifying as business and non-business actors for milieu analysis, (Issue 23), lobbying with government (Issue 24), illustration of milieu (Issue 25), competitive strategy as cooperative vs. competitive (Issue 26), competing arena in general (Issue 27), competing arena for clients (Issue 28), competing arena for contractors to generate demand (Issue 29), competitors using references with respect to portfolio (not network) of contracting firms (Issue 30), competitive position (Issue 31), competitors as a part of negotiation process (Issue 32), co-creation with regards to both client and contractor (Issue 33), the subject matter of project marketing (Issue 34), relationships in a network (Issue 35), following qualitative case study approach (Issue 36), data collections through face-to-face interview (Issue 37), a conceptual framework from literature (Issue 38), cross-case analysis (Issue 39), only structured review of literature (Issue 40), shaping hypotheses (Issue 41), and developing an overarching framework (Issue 42).

From the reviewed literature on stakeholders and their relationships as the milieu for communication in

project marketing over the past 16 years are mapped in *Table 1*. The following essential learning points have emerged from the same:

- Many studies have covered consultants (Issue 01), financing institutions (Issue 02), owners (Issue 03), engineering companies (Issue 06), customers (Issue 11), suppliers (Issue 13), sub-contractors (Issue 14), and governments (Issue 15) in the milieu of contracting firms; while only a few of them have included consumer groups (Issue 04), agents (Issue 05), third-party agencies (Issue 07), public institutions (Issue 08), regulatory bodies (Issue 09), bank (Issue 10), subsidiary (Issue 12), syndicates (Issue 16), lobbies (Issue 17), unions (Issue 18), pressure groups (Issue 19), and activists (Issue 20) in the milieu of contracting firms. Competitors of contracting firms (Issue 21) are not found at all covered in the milieu of contracting firms for studies published between 2006 and 2021.
- Although some studies have discussed illustration of the milieu (Issue 25); only a few of these reviewed studies have covered discussions on competitors in the market of project business (Issue 22), classifying as business and non-business actors (Issue 23), and lobbying with the government (Issue 24). Further, only one study, namely, Cova and Salle (2006) has discussed competitive strategy as cooperative vs. competitive in the milieu (Issue 26). Nevertheless, a competitive arena in general (Issue 27) is extensively studied with its unusual discussions limiting to a client (Issue 28) and contractors (Issue 29).
- Furthermore, only a few studies have sparsely covered discussions relating to competitors using references on the portfolio (not network) of contracting firms (Issue 30), competitive position (Issue 31), and competitors as a part of the negotiation process (Issue 32), and co-creation with both client and contractor (Issue 33).
- Even though many studies have discussed project marketing (Issue 34), relationship in network (Issue 35), qualitative case study (Issue 36), and data collections through a face-to-face interview (Issue 37); there is a paucity of academic research involving a conceptual framework from literature (Issue 38), cross-case analysis (Issue 39), and

carrying out a structured review of the literature (Issue 40).

- Finally, none of the studies have attempted to shape hypotheses (Issue 41) and develop an overarching framework (Issue 42) in project marketing while analyzing the milieu for stakeholders and their relationships in the past 16 years.

Earlier, Cova, Mazet, ' Salle (1994) stated that the demand milieu consists of several types of actors who can be external and internal but they did not include competitors in the demand milieu of the competing firms explicitly. Besides, the offer milieu consists of actors in the network of resources such as sub-contractors and competing firms with which a supplier carries out research and development programmes, where the entry of competitors cannot be restricted. Although several researchers have discussed the relatedness of milieu-based inter-organizational relationships and project execution, rarely competitors of a contractor have been explored. However, in reality, there always exists a possibility of a contractor influencing the client to suggest that competitors should be included in the milieu. This study attempts to fulfill this gap in the literature that competitors should be included explicitly in the milieu of contracting firms. Additionally, this study would attempt to build theory from case study research following Eisenhardt (1989) by both shaping hypotheses and developing an overarching framework in project marketing while analyzing the milieu of competing firms for communication among stakeholders and their relationships.

SELECTING CASES

Two cases involving contracting firms illustrate how a network of project stakeholders, including competitors, called milieu, is identified and managed to achieve the desired project outcome, which is the contract. These cases also shed light on the inter-linkages of interactions between functional development (FD) and relationship development (RD).

The population of this study is projects of the infrastructure sector, where it attempts to build an understanding of the milieu in the context of marketing. In the business of the projects, a contracting firm, and client firm play a major role in

executing projects, among other stakeholders in the project. The contracting firm usually submits its bid to the client firm, who then selects and decides a suitable contracting firm to award the contract. Contracting firms realize that a relationship approach can significantly reduce aggression from the client side when negotiating for the award of a contract. A strong milieu of the contracting firm can facilitate the smooth award of the contract from the client. Hence the population is made up of all contracting firms in the sphere of infrastructure project business.

The sample of this study involves contracting firms, which are included in two cases, namely, Case A and Case B. Case A deals with a contracting firm based in India. Case B deals with a contracting firm based in the United States. In both of these cases, the contracting firms are particularly specialized in the domain of infrastructure projects. Two different locations help provide an international context for the study. Both cases offer an extension of the emerging theory following Eisenhardt (1989). Specifically, Case A suggests that competitors should be included in the milieu of contracting firms to explore opportunities for cooperation by becoming subcontractors to each other, while Case B emphasizes the usage of milieu for bid/no-bid decisions. Therefore, these two cases together have been considered sufficient for this study.

CRAFTING INSTRUMENTS AND PROTOCOLS

An interview guide in which the questions to be answered was developed. An interview guide allows the interviewer to express questions in such a way that the respondent can understand them without any effort. It also allows the interviewer to conduct a more in-depth investigation when necessary (Goode ' Hatt, 1952). Keeping in mind the research questions, namely, the inter-linkage between FD and RD, and the inclusion of competitors in the milieu, we developed an interview guide. The guide was then discussed with a practitioner with more than 30 years of experience in a firm that has sponsored several projects in the past i.e. a client firm. Further, this guide was also discussed with representatives of the contracting firm. Thus, by the method of triangulation, the interview guide was developed.

Table 1: Evaluation of Studies Covering Stakeholders and Their Relationships as the Milieu

Label for Study	STUDY 01	STUDY 02	STUDY 03	STUDY 04	STUDY 05	STUDY 06	STUDY 07	STUDY 08	STUDY 09	STUDY 10	STUDY 11	STUDY 12	STUDY 13	STUDY 14	STUDY 15	STUDY 16	STUDY 17
TimeLine	2006	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Issue 01	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
Issue 02	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Issue 03				✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Issue 04						✓		✓	✓								
Issue 05	✓												✓			✓	
Issue 06	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Issue 07						✓						✓				✓	
Issue 08			✓													✓	
Issue 09				✓			✓							✓	✓		
Issue 10				✓													
Issue 11				✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Issue 12											✓						
Issue 13			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Issue 14	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Issue 15	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓				✓	✓	✓		✓
Issue 16	✓												✓				
Issue 17	✓			✓		✓										✓	
Issue 18	✓															✓	
Issue 19	✓		✓	✓											✓	✓	
Issue 20	✓			✓			✓	✓								✓	
Issue 21																	

Table 1: Evaluation of Studies Covering Stakeholders and Their Relationships as the Milieu (Contd...)

Label for Study	STUDY 01	STUDY 02	STUDY 03	STUDY 04	STUDY 05	STUDY 06	STUDY 07	STUDY 08	STUDY 09	STUDY 10	STUDY 11	STUDY 12	STUDY 13	STUDY 14	STUDY 15	STUDY 16	STUDY 17
TimeLine	2006	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Issue 22																✓	
Issue 23	✓															✓	
Issue 24												✓					
Issue 25	✓		✓		✓	✓								✓			
Issue 26	✓																
Issue 27	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Issue 28								✓									
Issue 29									✓								
Issue 30			✓														
Issue 31		✓															
Issue 32				✓							✓				✓		
Issue 33												✓		✓			
Issue 34	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓			✓	✓	
Issue 35	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Issue 36	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Issue 37	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Issue 38		✓	✓														
Issue 39																✓	
Issue 40																	✓
Issue 41																	
Issue 42																	

Note: The markings '✓' denote that the issues (in rows) are present in particular study (in columns).

ENTERING THE FIELD

Case A

Background

Case A's company is an Indian engineering firm with a diversified business portfolio in projects, products, and high-tech manufacturing. The firm was founded after India's independence in 1947 with a missionary zeal to contribute to the building of a modern nation. The firm has a strong engineering team to undertake projects in the fields of nuclear power, aerospace, missiles, defence, oil and gas, steam generation plants, and independent power projects. It undertakes all types of turnkey engineering projects such as sugar plant, automotive plant, pharmaceutical plant, and cement plant. It has a large proven reference list of satisfied customers worldwide.

This firm was founded by a very passionate mechanical engineer. Their Special Projects Division (SPD) is essentially set up to bid and undertake unique projects in India and abroad, which are technically very complex and challenging irrespective of the value of the project. However, due to this approach, SPD remains a niche player with fewer client accounts than its counterpart competitors. To continue its objective of undertaking challenging projects only in SPD, it hires highly talented and sound engineers who have a flair for doing technical jobs that are challenging, demanding, involved and complex. The firm also has a General Projects Division (GPD), which caters to general projects in sectors like sugar, cement, automobile, etc., and a manufacturing division for handling complex as well as heavy jobs with the highest degree of accuracy and precision using state-of-the-art machinery. The bulk of its earnings come from these two divisions. The share of government jobs is around 30% while 70% of the customers are from the private sector.

Project Acquisition Process

Marketing Logic of A

SPD has committed itself to the logic of project marketing –“from transaction to relationship marketing”. It maintains the relationship after handing over the project to the client through providing services. It has dedicated itself to providing a prompt supply of components, pieces of equipment, and systems of a project requiring replacement at a

reasonable price. It aggressively offers to retrofit obsolete systems of older projects that its clients plan to replace with new ones to save money for the client. This logic has helped SPD to develop deeper relationships with its clients. A adopts the same logic for its GPD and other manufacturing businesses. However, it also participates in the traditional 'bidding process', which is quite common in India.

Phases of Marketing

Usually, SPD completes its marketing process in three stages, namely, Independent of any Project, Pre-tendering, and Tendering.

- **Independent of any Project:** By visiting customers on courtesy as well as a cold call, SPD representatives explore new possibilities for new projects. If they explore one, SPD develops a comprehensive budgetary proposal jointly with clients and presents them further. It then continues to fine-tune its proposal based on the client's consultation to ensure that both have a broad understanding of it. The client can then get in touch with other interested bidders and solicit budgetary proposals. Visiting clients in this stage allows SPD to generally fit their proposal into the minds of clients. Thus SPD has the opportunity to influence clients in determining their requirements to develop an attractive proposal well ahead of time that clients cannot afford to ignore. However, its competitors are obliged to comply with client-developed tender documents with the active participation of SPD. Thus SPD manages to be comfortable when bidding and negotiating with its clients, while its competitors only have to comply with most of the requirements— a situation in convenient to them vis-à-vis scope or technical specification or price or all. A has meticulously developed a good business network with consulting firms, financial institutions that sponsor projects, suppliers, influential politicians, and competitors. This network also provides important clues to A, providing strong testimonials and good word-of-mouth publicity, resulting in getting many challenging contracts.
- **Strategic Priorities:** Compared to GPD, SPD has a portfolio of only a handful of clients. It is not uncommon that a project business typically has very few clients, although the value involved is

huge. A believes in developing a deep relationship with its clients to get repeat business with them. Therefore, A has adopted a product development strategy, developing new products to achieve deeper relationships with its existing clients, without the limitations of the scope of the project in broad domains of engineering, namely, Chemical, Electrical, and Mechanical.

- **Functional Development:** Due to its technical prowess, SPD can develop the technical side of the project on its own. It enjoys strong support from competent suppliers and subcontractors. The successful track record of executing a wide variety of first-of-its-kind projects over the last fifty-five years has led to the rendering of A to bid for new projects with existing clients. This has also resulted in a slowly expanding list of clients. Based on the input received by their Business Development (BD) personnel, a team of engineers is arranged who discuss the scope of work, engineering calculations, technical specifications, drawings, and quality assurance plans, etc.
- **Relational Development:** A maintains a strong relationship with the client. A strong relationship with clients opens up opportunities for new project development. Its BD representatives visit clients and ask: "What can we do for you? What are your technical challenges? We are willing to offer you a solution." Clients respond to this and explore projects that can be awarded to A. Upon deliberations, SPD of A has the opportunity to develop new projects, make a suitable offer, negotiate and get the job, thereby generating revenue for them. Thus the relationship that developed in the past with a very different project scope was responsible for the development of a new project. Thus RD causes FD resulting in the contract. A has a strong belief in networking, a legacy that current management has inherited from the firm's founder. It has developed an excellent relationship with different consulting firms that are often hired by clients to work on their behalf and also advise clients on techno-commercial matters. By providing quick response, doing it the right way every time, making the right technical suggestions, and so on, SPD has instilled a deep sense of respect for itself from both

its clients and consultants. Existing clients know SPD well and consider it a reliable supplier. New clients hear about A from different consultants and also create a good image about it. A has maintained excellent rapport with third-party inspection agencies, financial institutions, ministries, bureaucracy, and different political parties. It also has the knack to develop good relations with the media, police, influential non-governmental organizations, etc. in the places where they undertake projects. A takes advantage of this to develop new clients and gain business. A also has excellent relationships with its competitors and considers them as a part of its network, commonly referred to as milieu in the context of project marketing (see, *Fig. 1*). Whenever its competitors get a job from the client, and they feel that the A is in a better position to execute a part of the project, they outsource this part of the scope to SPD. Since A has a state-of-the-art manufacturing facility, its competitors typically get a lot of machining and fabrication work done from it. Furthermore, whenever A discovers that its competitors have a good relationship with the client, it adopts a two-pronged tactic - not to take an aggressive stance during negotiations with the client to outbid competitors and work with them as a subcontractor for getting a slice of the new project or supply components for the project bagged by the competitor. The analysis of the milieu represented in *Fig. 1* is as under:

- Milieu development and analysis of Case A:

1. The client has a strong positive relationship with the politicians, who will support the client's project by facilitating statutory clearances.
2. The client has a strong positive relationship with the financial institution suggesting that funding will be made available for the project.
3. The client has a strong positive relationship with the consultant. It is expected because the client has appointed this consultant.
4. The client has a strong positive relationship with competitor C1.
5. The client has a normal positive relation with competitor C2.

6. All competitors, namely, C1, C2, and C3 have a normal positive relation with politicians.
7. All competitors, namely, C1, C2, and C3 have a normal positive relation with statutory bodies.
8. All competitors, namely, C1, C2, and C3 have a normal positive relation with the financial institution. They all have current accounts with the same bank.
9. A has a strong positive relationship with the consultant while its competitors have a normal positive relation with the consultant as they all have previously worked with the consultant on different projects.
10. A has a strong positive relationship with all its competitors.

Based on the above, A understood that C1 is better placed to get the contract. Thus A was not keen to get the contract and decided to participate in the bidding process only for the sake of participation. It decided to approach C1 to work as its subcontractor on the same project, which was agreed to by C1.

- **Pre-tendering:** The client takes forward the comprehensive budgetary proposals by developing tender documents such as technical specifications, codes/standards, inspection schedules, quality assurance plans, drawings, etc. by referring to the offers received if required. There is usually a slight tilt towards SPD, due to the early contact initiative of SPD, efforts to convince and educate clients, and so on. This slight inclination towards SPD can make all the difference during the tendering stage where negotiations normally take place.
- **Project Scanning:** SPD takes into account the possibility of repeat projects (which may be then handled by GPD in the future) from the same and other existing clients, including the possibility of new projects information from the same client, availability of know-how, the difficulty of design, reputation, the risk involved, margins expected, funding agency (if any) from client-side in the project, the probable budget of the client, etc. before it develops the project.
- **Project Development:** SPD uses the work breakdown structure concept to estimate the work

involved in the project by breaking down the tasks. This gives SPD a good idea of cost, risk, and time involvement in the project.

- **Tendering:** Clients usually seek competitive offers (usually three or more). It helps clients to interact with bidders. Clients typically negotiate commercial terms and conditions with price and project delivery date. However, many clients in the private sector (where SPD is popular) can negotiate the scope as well the technical aspects along with the proposal. In the case of SPD, the experience is that the customer provides a counteroffer after getting an idea of price by discussing with other bidders. Thus SPD strategically stands out in a fairly favourable position.
 - **Project Offer:** Based on the above, SPD is now ready to bid for the job. Typically for all first-of-its-kind jobs, it proposes a Cost Plus type contract. The relationship developed with the client facilitates acceptance of such a contract by the client.
 - **Project Negotiations:** Inviting competitive bids from various contractors to get a better deal is very common with clients. Generally, there is a detailed discussion on the scope, technical and commercial part of the offer.
 - **Contract:** Successful negotiations can lead to the consideration of a contract between the client and the contractor.

Case B

Background

B, a medium-sized and relatively new construction contracting firm in the United States (US) incorporated in Chicago in 2017, was founded by two partners who hold master's degrees in civil engineering as well as management from reputed universities in the US. Before their start-up, they had acquired over twenty years of experience in infrastructure and building construction. They were fortunate to have the opportunity to work in design, planning, execution, contracting, and finally business development. B earns annual revenue of about twelve million USD with less than 200 employees. These employees include skilled and unskilled operators of different trades, supervisors, other project management, and general management personnel. The partners take a keen

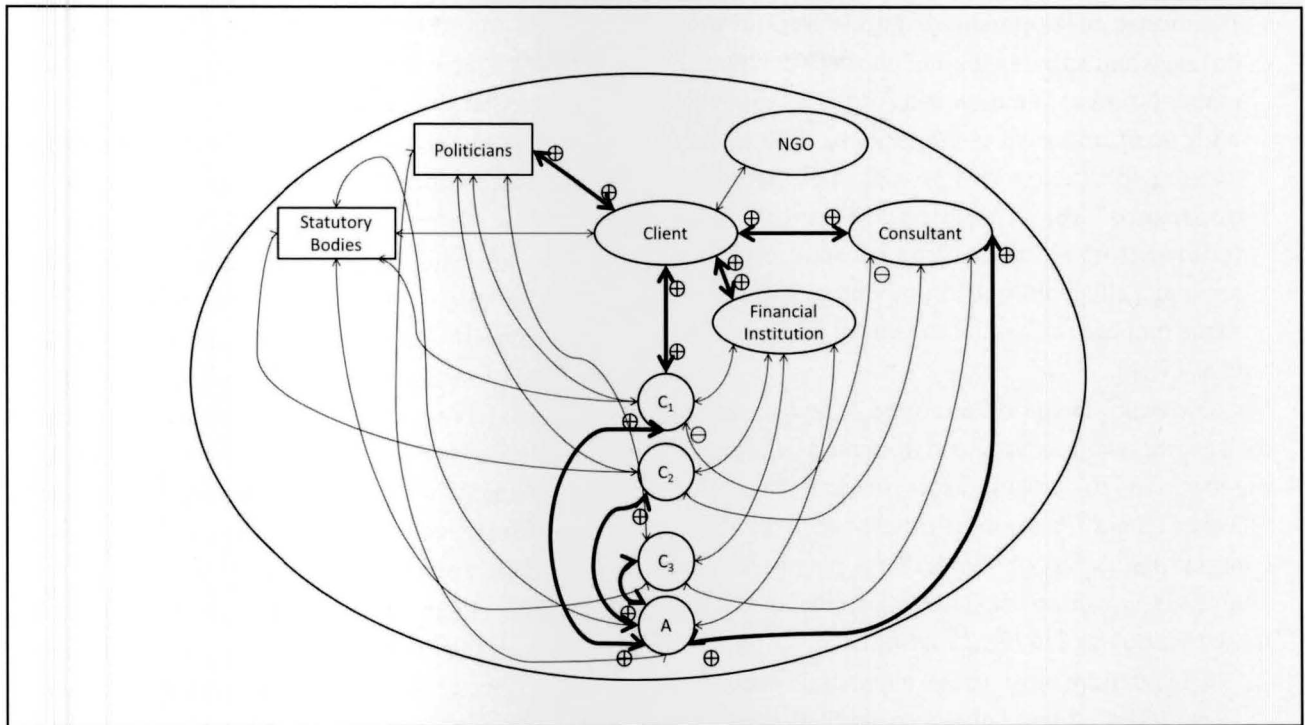


Figure. 1: Milieu Representation of Case A

interest and involve themselves deeply in marketing and finance functions.

Project Acquisition Process

Marketing Logic of B

B currently has very few customer accounts. This number is not sufficient to sustain B in the long run. Its focus is on obtaining more jobs. Thus it gets aggressively involved with tendering for jobs wherever possible. It explores all the possible contacts that partners had developed while they were in jobs before forming B. The partners have committed themselves to invest more time with prospects while exploring opportunities to acquire new businesses in the domain of construction from existing clients. Thus B believes in relationship marketing in the long run.

Phases of Marketing

B completes its marketing process in three stages, namely, Independent of any Project, Pre-tendering, and Tendering.

- Independent of any project: Both partners had established good contacts while in their jobs before the start-up. The partners visit these contacts periodically to explore the possibilities of the business. B always garners support from other known agencies such as consultants, financial institutions, etc. for testimonials and

recommendations. If opportunities exist, B develops and submits the proposal to the clients. Often these proposals will undergo modifications. This approach is successful and B acquires business subject to favourable negotiations with these contacts. Wherever B had not established relations, it aggressively participated in the tendering process in response to inquiries.

- Strategic Priorities: B has very few clients being a relatively new firm in the business. Its partners are however highly experienced and seasoned in the business. They are aware of the fact that a small number of clients will not be able to sustain their business in the long-term perspective. Thus in a short-term perspective, it has adopted a market development strategy that seeks to gain a substantial number of new clients with the existing project portfolio. Their plan for a long-term perspective is to adopt a relationship marketing strategy. Currently, B undertakes service contracts from existing clients in the form of repairs, maintenance, and upgrades. They do this to maintain their contact with existing clients to explore new opportunities for doing business in the construction sector only.

- Relational development: B is relatively new in business and has very few clients on its account. B makes it a point to maintain a cordial relationship with them under all circumstances. It is always looking to develop new tie-ups such as client-contractor relationships, the contractor (competitor) – subcontractor relationships, strategic alliances with competitors and other firms that are influential in getting business, etc. (see, *Fig. 2*).
- Milieu development and analysis: A typical milieu for a project was analysed and discussed with one of the partners to explain how Buses it to decide whether to bid for a job or otherwise. B treats all competitors as part of the network or milieu. The analysis is a qualitative exercise. The analysis of the milieu represented in *Fig. 2* is as under:
 1. The relationship between client and consultant is cordial. They have both worked on many projects in the past and the client has appointed the same consultant for the current project.
 2. Competitor C1 has a strong positive relationship with the client as it has successfully delivered the earlier project to the customer some two months ago. The project met the requirements with minimal delay. The delay was not significant and the client has reasons to believe that the delay was not caused by the contractor. C1 also completed a project three years ago to the satisfaction of the client.
 3. Competitor C2 also completed a short assignment a year ago. However, the relationship with the client is a normal positive.
 4. Competitor C3 and B had never done any business with the client.
 5. B has a strong positive relationship with C1, while it has a normal positive relationship with C2.
 6. All four contractors and the client have a good relationship with the local politician affiliated with the ruling party, but the relationship is very strongly positive between C1 and the politician, and client and politician. All contractors have a neutral relationship with the opposition party.
 7. All four contractors have a relationship with the statutory bodies.
 8. The client has a strong positive relationship with the local NGO.
 9. Competitors C2 and C3 have a positive relationship with the consultant appointed by the client. B has a very strong positive relationship with the consultant. The relationship between C1 and consultant is not positive because of some unpleasant experience (partly the consultant too was to be blamed) with C1. But the consultant has not blacklisted C1 and may work with them if the client appoints C1 as its contractor.
 10. The client has a strong positive relationship with the World Bank, which is the Financial Institute sponsoring the project of the client.
 11. All contractors have worked on World Bank-sponsored projects in the past and generally have a positive relationship with the FI.

B concluded that C1 is placed in a comfortable situation i.e. it does stand a chance to get the job from the client. C2 stands next to C1. Since B has a good positive relationship with C1 and a strong positive relationship with the consultant. At the same time, C1 does not enjoy a good relationship with the consultant, B approached C1 with a proposal to become a subcontractor of C1 and also a promise to plead C1's case with the consultant. B's presence as the subcontractor of C1 will help to improve the relationship between C1 and the consultant. Finally, C1 gets the contract, and B may also get an opportunity as a subcontractor in the project. Thus B believes in developing and using the network i.e. milieu to get business from unknown clients. It seems that RD is a route for FD in the domain of construction. This strategy is working well for B. That is, B tries its best to build a strong relationship with its competitors (most of the competitors are large by the number of years in the business). Only when B is convinced that it is not possible to work with the contractor in the capacity of a subcontractor, it decides to bid aggressively to obtain a contract for the project

related to the client.

- **Functional development:** B gets into FD only if existing clients approach B for their construction requirements. Otherwise, it does not involve itself with functional development of its own. In response to the informal enquiry, it arranges a team of project management specialists to develop scope, technical details, preliminary drawings, etc. in the domain of construction. Subject to the acceptance of scope and technical details by the client, it develops a detailed proposal to include commercial terms and conditions for the perusal of the client, who then decides to conduct negotiations for the award of contract. Clients often consider bids from competitors for negotiations. However, B does get preferential treatment over its competitors in the award of the contract.
- **Pretendering:** B thoroughly scans publications providing details of upcoming projects in the US.
- **Project Scanning:** Such publications typically provide the name of the client, the name of the point of contact, the information on the project, the name of the consultant (if appointed), the stage of the project, the likely award of the project, the completion time, and the like. This information is used to:
 - Check if the people known to its partners are concerned with the project i.e. see if they work in client organizations or consultant organizations or do they know some influential personnel in the client organizations. B contacts them to eventually get the business.
 - Find out who the likely/actual bidders are and analyse them to evaluate the chances of B getting the contract. They conduct a network analysis for the same.
 - If the likelihood of getting the job is low, explore the possibility of becoming a subcontractor of the likely/actual main

contractor on the project.

- **Project Development:** B confines itself to the construction domain and is interested in all such projects with financially sound clientele. It works harder to bid as low a price as possible. This approach helps to get the job either directly from the client or the main contractor (competitor) on the project.
- **Tendering:** B then conducts a milieu analysis with all the likely bidders (competitors) and decides to quote or not to quote. If it decides to quote, it attempts to quote the lowest possible bid to get the contract.
 - **Project offer:** B submits a detailed offer that includes scope, technical details such as specification sheets, engineering calculations, drawings, and planning along with commercial terms.
 - **Project Negotiations:** B caters mostly to government clients who typically freeze the scope and technical parts of the project in the pre-tendering stage. Usually, only the commercial part, including the price, is left open for negotiations. B works very hard on the cost so that the lowest price is offered to get the contract.
 - **Contract:** The contract is usually awarded to the lowest bidder and the deviations are only exceptional.

Analyzing Data

Within-case Analysis of Case A:

All FD at A is client-driven. It is committed to planning the project to fully comply with quality requirements, avoid disputes, and maintain a hassle-free relationship with clients. This brings satisfaction to the client. Besides, A offers services such as the supply of components, pieces of equipment systems that makes up the constituents of projects and retrofit at a reasonable price as well as on time. It helps A to maintain continuity of relationship with the client, taking advantage of obtaining a new project with the same or completely different scope (it has minimized constraint on the scope by developing and delivering projects from the domains like civil, chemical,

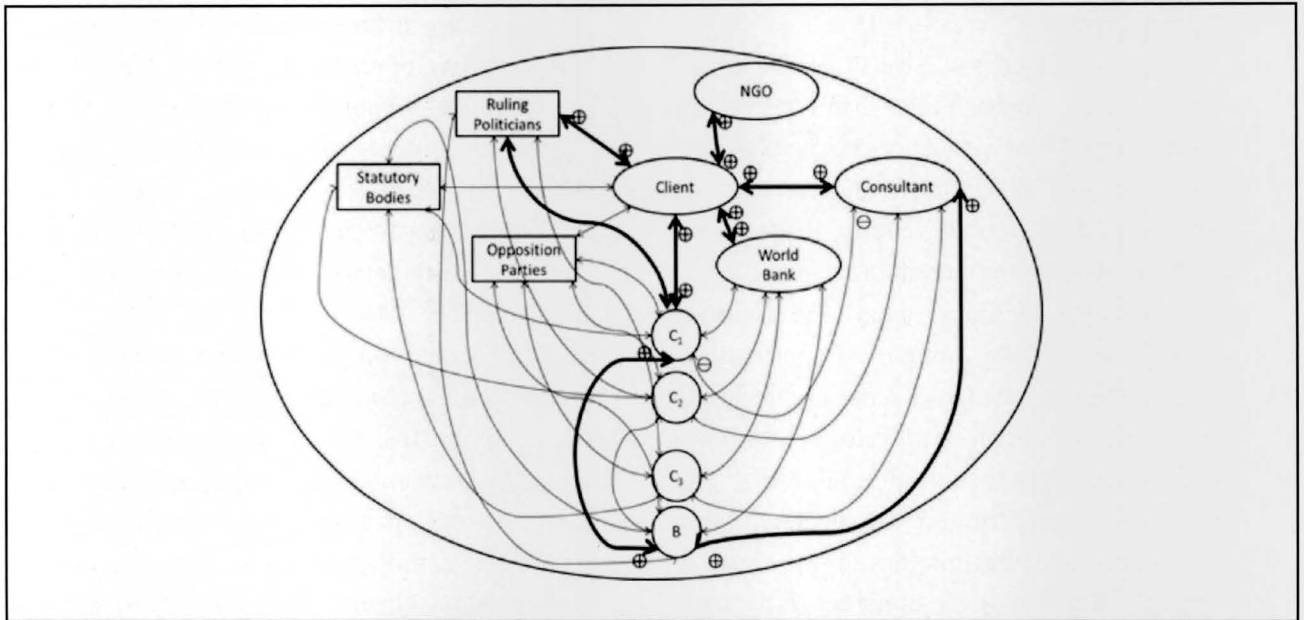


Figure 2: Milieu Representation of Case B

electrical, and mechanical) from clients. Thus, it has not only adopted the relationship approach to marketing but has ensured that all FD will be driven by relationships.

In cases where the client is new to A, when it is not part of the milieu of A, it uses the network to its advantage. It benefits from its cordial relationships with existing clients, consultants, financial institutions that fund projects, third-party inspection agencies, politicians (developed during earlier projects), and good word-of-mouth publicity, recommendations, and testimonials. Thus it uses the 'good offices' of its network to approach new clients to explore new opportunities for the project. Here also it uses the approach of RD to FD, which can result in business for A. Such an approach leads to focused efforts for FD with minimal cost and risk.

As a practice, clients do seek competing offers; however, clients do not take a very aggressive position during negotiations as:

1. A has built a reputation of being willing and capable of handling first-of-its-kind/complex projects in the country.
2. There usually is a slight tilt towards A owing to its early contact and initiative of A to educate and convince clients.
3. The long-standing relationship with clients and other typical stakeholders comes in handy

during negotiations.

4. A sophisticated manufacturing facility compels its competitors to outsource a small portion of the project to A. Thus A stands to gain a slice of revenue and profit from each project that is up and hence A does not accept unreasonably low price counteroffer. By its sophisticated manufacturing facilities and monopoly, it gets these parts of the project at a good price from its competitors.

A has a good relationship with most of its competitors. Wherever it finds that the competitors are better positioned to get business from the clients, it ceases to be deeply interested in the job, does not greatly reduce its price, and does not relax its commercial terms. This enables its competitors to get the job at a reasonably good price and commercial terms. Such a gesture creates a strong positive relationship with its competitors. A then approaches the successful bidder i.e. its competitor and offers to become its subcontractor if the competitor is financially sound. Whenever A is not interested in the job, it recommends favorable competitors to the client for the award of the contract. Therefore A considers competitors as an important constituent of its business network or milieu.

Within-case Analysis of Case B:

B believes in a relationship approach to marketing.

However, being relatively new in the industry, it does not have enough clients to focus on them for new business. Thus in the short run, it believes in acquiring new clients even on wafer-thin margins. It works hard on its costing to come out with the lowest possible bid price. It also does its best to keep its clients satisfied and thus hopes to get benefitted in the long run by way of new business. Its commitment to the relationship is demonstrated by the fact that it undertakes repairs, maintenance, and upgrade jobs from existing clients. Since B keeps its clients satisfied, they are inclined to give new business to B. Clients do negotiate to get a better deal.

B also explores aggressively the possibility of developing a relationship with its competitors. Whenever B finds that it is not in a comfortable position to get the contract, it tries to become its subcontractors to avoid head-on competition and still get a share of the project under the consideration of the client. It also attempts to form a strategic alliance with its competitors before bidding for large jobs. Thus B treats its competitors as a part of its business network or milieu. However, whenever such a relationship is not feasible, it bids aggressively to get the contract. In this situation, B analyzes the milieu (that includes competitors) before bidding to decide whether to bid or not to bid for the concerned project. It, therefore, uses the milieu as a decision-making tool and applies the judgment-based approach for the purpose.

Cross-case Patterns

The two firms regard the relationship as a trigger for their FD. Both firms get involved with the FD of a new product/project only after receiving a trigger from the clients. This approach saves a lot of time, effort, and money while reducing the risk of failure. B, being a relatively new firm, has adopted the policy in the short term to participate aggressively in the bidding process, whenever it is comfortable with the scope that is its construction domain. In the long term after it gets a sufficient number of clients, it plans to focus more on the relationship approach. In both cases, it is strongly suggested that competitors be included in the milieu. Both firms use the milieu with competitors deciding whether to bid or not to bid. In short, cross-case patterns reveal:

- If both firms find that competitors are favorably placed to receive contracts and their relationship

with their competitors is positive such that they have a good chance of becoming subcontractors, then they do not take much interest in bidding and allow competitors to get the contract on more favorable terms.

- If A finds that competitors are favorably placed to receive contracts and it may not get the opportunity to become a sub-contractor, then it explores the opportunity to supply components of the main project (provided its expected income is to its satisfaction) under its state-of-the-art manufacturing facilities, which none of its competitors have. If such a situation exists irrespective of both low and high demand, A does take an interest in bidding but does not go all-out to win the job rather it allows its competitors to get a better deal in negotiation to help avoid price-war among competitors.
- If B finds that competitors are favorably placed to receive contracts and it may not have the opportunity to become a subcontractor, then it decides to bid aggressively to get the contract until it acquires a sufficient number of clients to adopt relationship approach in future. B does not have manufacturing facilities and thus cannot explore the possibility of supplying components of the main project to competitors. Once a critical mass of number of clients is achieved, B plans to adopt a relationship approach to project marketing in situation of high demand. But, during the situation of low demand, there is a danger of price-war as B starts to bid aggressively when it does not have good relationship with competitors.

These remarks have assumed that if A has a strongly positive relationship with its client, it is quite confident of winning the contract like in the case of B. Therefore, both firms use the milieu with competitors as a decision-making tool. Both firms use qualitative analysis of the milieu. Both firms consider RD as a trigger for FD. They refrain from any development that is not triggered by the clients.

Shaping Hypotheses

From the within-case analysis plus various cross-case tactics and overall impressions, the following hypotheses begin to shape:

- FD results from triggers received by RD.
- FD resulting from a relationship is focused, cost-

effective, timely, and low on the risk of failure.

- The relationship approach to project marketing is contingent on a critical number of clients.
- Competitors are an important element of the milieu and possibilities of an alliance of different nature, such as subcontractors, must be explored before engaging in aggressive bidding.
- Whenever a competitor is favorably placed to get a contract, there will be no aggression during negotiations, provided there is a possibility of a subcontractor or supplier relationship.

These hypotheses also represent relationships between temporal themes, concepts, and possible variables. Readers can apply their standards to demonstrate the strength and consistency of relationships within and across cases.

Enfolding Literature

Comparison with Similar Literature

Cova, Mazet, ' Salle (1994) in their seminal work on project marketing, consider the milieu as a social connection of relationship with actors having contacts with many other actors and state that these actors include ministries, local public bodies, experts, and international fund providers. In their case-study-based approach, they considered four French firms (one of which had been taken over by a German firm) from the construction, oil, energy, and defense sectors. It is only in the case of a firm from the defense sector that competitors form a part of the milieu.

Besides, Cova, Ghauri, ' Salle (2002) and Ahola, Kujala, Laaksonen, ' Aaltonen (2013) suggest a mutually interactive relationship between FD and RD, however, they looked at RD as a means to get business and FD as a mechanism to execute the business opportunity in the project. The supplier firm after spotting an opportunity conceptualizes a project, carries out a feasibility study, and develops a turnkey project at the technical, financial, legal, political, and environmental levels (Cova, Mazet, ' Salle, 1994).

Comparison with Conflicting Literature

Subsequent studies, some of them as a co-author with Cova, also do not include competitors in the milieu, for example:

- Cova, Mazet, ' Salle (1994) in their case study based research on milieu did not consider competitors as a part of the milieu.
- Cova ' Hoskins (1997) in their study on the twin-track approach to project marketing also did not

consider competitors as a part of the milieu.

- Jalkala, Cova, Salle, ' Salminen (2010) in their study on changes occurring in project business context are silent on the inclusion of competitors in networks.
- Welch, Welch, Wilkinson, ' Young (1996) in their study on network development in international project marketing also did not include competitors as a part of the milieu.

Considering our case studies and a broad range of literature, an overarching framework using milieu for contract is shown in *Fig. 3*. This framework follows Cova, Mazet, ' Salle (1994) to suggest that the supplier is sufficiently advanced in terms of its core offer and tries to take it forward from there with the client organization indicating that the basic FD succeeds RD (see, for example, Sariola ' Martinsuo (2015)).

Nevertheless, we also noted a contrary observation in the present study that the basic FD may occur directly in response to a serious trigger from the client organization. Whenever the contractor has a prior relationship with the client, the client is part of the contractor's milieu. This milieu directly triggers FD resulting in a contract. This prior relationship may have been developed as a response to a past tender enquiry and concomitant contract. Whenever the contractor is not aware of the client, i.e., the client is not part of the contractor's milieu, the contractor can use the members of the network to develop a relationship with the client to trigger FD to result in the contract. This framework intends to use RD as a tool to spot business opportunities like Ahola, Kujala, Laaksonen, ' Aaltonen (2013) whereas FD should be specifically used as a tool for developing new project.

Reaching Closure

Implications

The policy of undertaking only FD in response to the serious requirement of the existing client organization will keep development efforts focused, time-bound, cost-effective, and low-risk. This makes FD more affordable for contracting firms. It may result in reduced aggression by the client organization during negotiations for the award of the contract.

The fallout of involving competitors in the milieu may be exploring options such as becoming a subcontractor or supplier of key components of the project. This would in turn avoid intense negotiation to obtain the

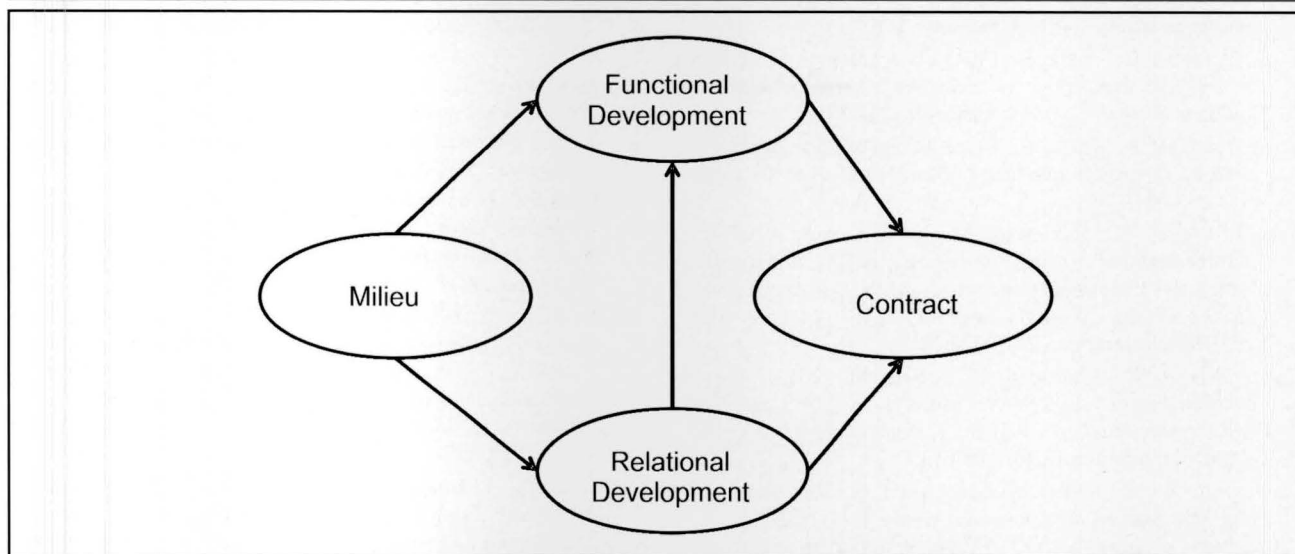


Figure 3: An Overarching Framework of Milieu

contract. Further, this way price-war and unhealthy commercial terms can be avoided.

Contributions

This study contributes to enhanced understanding of the milieu, including the interplay of FD and RD of competitors, which may be further fine-tuned by the researchers in time to come. This study has followed Eisenhardt (1989) to build a theory on milieu using case study research. The study helps to extend the extant knowledge by shaping five hypotheses. Further, this study will contribute to improving the texture of the infrastructure construction sector by reducing aggression during the process of negotiation. Finally, this study has also provided an overarching framework that can undergo statistical testing in the future.

Concluding Remarks

The study will help contracting firms to gain strategic advantage as a result of 'soft' interactions with client firms when they include competitors in their milieu. It will eventually become financially healthy in the region. By responding only to serious triggers from client firms, contracting firms will be able to keep their FD focused, time-bound, cost-effective, and low-risk.

Declaration of Interest

Declarations of interest: none

Research Data for This Article

All data generated or analyzed during the study are included in the published paper.

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