



External stakeholder strategic actions in projects: A multi-case study

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Abstract

Although understanding external stakeholders' influence is important to achieving success, little attention has been paid to their influence strategies in project management. This paper aims to explore combinations of actions that external stakeholders normally pursue to influence construction projects, and to hypothesise factors affecting the use of these combinations. A theoretical framework of stakeholder strategic actions was proposed and applied, and a multiple-case study in the Vietnamese construction industry was employed. Three combinations of influence strategies were identified: communication and credibility building were employed concurrently by organised groups in projects affecting the environment; direct action and conflict escalation were exerted together by unorganised groups in cases leading to displacements of the locals; and coalition building was combined with communication by both groups irrespective of projects' impacts. The utilisation of a combination can be affected by the selection of lobbying actions and characteristics of individual strategies, and stakeholders' motives, attributes and perceptions.

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1. Introduction

The actions of external stakeholders affect not only their targets, but also the entire project environment (Schepper et al., 2014). Therefore, understanding their interests as well as the means through which they attempt to achieve their objectives is critical to achieving success (Aaltonen et al., 2008). Few studies have focused on the actions stakeholders may employ to affect projects, in which the research subjects can be stakeholders in general (Aaltonen et al., 2008; Aaltonen and Kujala, 2010) or

specific groups, such as social network users (Williams et al., 2015) and governmental authorities (Sallinen et al., 2013). Although stakeholders can gain greater influence and facilitate success by using multiple strategies (Hendry, 2005), little attention has been given to studying this phenomenon.

The significance of internal as well as external stakeholders to the development of construction projects has been widely acknowledged (Oppong et al., 2017). While internal stakeholders will normally in support of a project, the others may be in favour, against or be indifferent (Winch, 2004). Additionally, the adverse influence of external stakeholders on construction projects has been reported recently (Chan and Oppong, 2017; Maddaloni and Davis, 2018; Teo and Loosemore 2017). Consequently, there is a need for a proper understanding of what they can do to affect construction projects.

The aims of this paper are twofold: first, to investigate what combinations of influence strategies external stakeholders

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normally employ to affect construction projects, and second, to hypothesise factors affecting the use of these combinations. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: first, we review the extant literature on stakeholder influence, and propose a theoretical framework used for examining stakeholder strategic actions; subsequent to the research methodology, we present the case analyses and discussion; lastly, the paper is concluded with recommendations for construction project managers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Stakeholder theory

Since Freeman (1984) published the classic book *Strategic Management: A stakeholder Approach*, stakeholder theory has developed rapidly as “its managerial prescriptions and implications are nearly limitless” (Phillips et al., 2003, p. 479). As a result, distinct research streams have emerged in the literature. Donaldson and Preston (1995), for instance, classifies stakeholder theory into three aspects, namely ‘descriptive’, ‘instrumental’ and ‘normative’. Kaler (2003, p. 74) asserts that this classification is “primarily a question of content rather than use” and proposes an alternative categorisation which includes four groups: ‘qualified and weak’, ‘qualified and strong’, ‘unqualified and strong version with no accountability to non-shareholders’ and ‘unqualified and strong version with accountability to non-shareholders’. More recently, in a review of stakeholder theory in organisation literature, Laplume et al. (2008) identify five main themes: ‘definition and salience’, ‘stakeholder actions and responses’, ‘firm actions and responses’, ‘firm performance’ and ‘theory debate’. Compared with two previous studies, the findings of Laplume et al. (2008) provide a more specific reflection of contemporary research trends in stakeholder theory. Two influential works representing the first two themes, namely ‘stakeholder salience model’ of Mitchell et al. (1997) and ‘stakeholder influence strategies’ of Frooman (1999), are selected as the underlying bases of the theoretical framework illustrated in Section 3.

Stakeholder theory has gained significant attention in project management. For example: a special issue was presented in *Construction Management and Economics*, bringing “together contributions that reflect the contemporary and emerging themes affecting project owners and their team in stakeholder management” (Atkin and Skitmore, 2008, p. 549–550). In a similar vein, the editors of *Project Management Journal* introduced another special issue, attempting to advance the comprehension of stakeholder management by investigating theories outside the field of the project management (Eskerod et al., 2015b). Additionally, numerous review papers have been published in recent years, confirming the importance role of stakeholders in managing projects (cf Aaltonen and Kujala, 2016; Achterkamp and Vos, 2008; Chan and Oppong, 2017; Littau et al., 2010; Maddaloni and Davis, 2017; Mok et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2018b; Oppong et al., 2017).

Project stakeholder management approaches can be categorised into ‘management of stakeholders’ and ‘management for stakeholders’ (see Freeman et al., 2007; Freeman et

al., 2010). The former approach requires stakeholders to abide by the project needs and requirements, prioritising stakeholders according to their level of importance to project success; the latter considers that all stakeholders are equally important, searching for win-win resolutions when conflicts among the parties arise. Generally, the literature on project stakeholder management, as Winch (2017) point outs, has focused on the instrumental approach, often ignoring those who are impacted by the delivery of the project mission. Scholars have increasingly called for a shift toward the management for stakeholder approach, aiming to achieve sustainable development (Davis, 2018; Eskerod et al., 2015a; Eskerod and Huemann, 2013; Eskerod and Jepsen, 2016; Eskerod and Huemann, 2014; Huemann et al., 2016; Huemann and Zuchi, 2014).

2.2. Stakeholder identification and classification

Stakeholder identification plays a crucial role in the management process (Karlsen, 2002; Sutterfield et al., 2006; Turner, 2014) because classifying stakeholders serves as the basis for identifying who they are (Achterkamp and Vos, 2007; Vos and Achterkamp, 2006). The classification can be as simple as including two generic groups such as internal and external (Orpwood, 1985), primary and secondary (Clarkson, 1995) and fiduciary and non-fiduciary (Goodpaster, 1991). Alternatively, stakeholders can be categorised into at least four groups according to their influencing capability (Savage et al., 1991), sociodynamic position (D’Herbemont and Cesar, 1998), configurations (Friedman and Miles, 2002), and specific roles within projects (Roeder, 2013; Trentim, 2015); such categorisations are directly connected with management strategies. Other useful models have also been developed as a result of synthesising previous definition and classification approaches (see Miles, 2017; Mitchell et al., 1997). Given the variety of approaches to classifying stakeholders, a model, according to Achterkamp and Vos (2008), should fit the usage situation. In this study, we adopt the internal-external categorisation to explore stakeholder strategic actions.

External stakeholders, according to Cleland, (1988, p. 281), are “not usually subject to the legal authority of the project manager.” Similarly, Calvert (1995, p. 215) emphasises that they are “free to behave in any way they choose with no regard for the project.” In a more specific description, Winch (2004, p. 323) asserts that while internal groups normally have direct or indirect contractual relationships with the client, the external groups “rarely have a directly enforceable claim on the project and are therefore reliant upon regulators to act on their behalf, the mobilization of political influence either covertly or through public campaigns, or, occasionally, direct action.” More recently, it has been shown that governmental authorities, affected local communities and the general public are the most crucial external stakeholders in construction projects (Atkin and Skitmore, 2008; Chan and Oppong, 2017; Olander and Landin, 2008; PMI, 2016). In short: external stakeholders in the built environment include those who can affect or are affected

by a project, and they may not have any contractual relationship with the project owner.

2.3. Stakeholder influence

Despite a considerable number of studies on stakeholder influence, the vast majority only emphasise classifying and prioritising project stakeholders (see Aragonés-Beltrán et al., 2017; Bourne and Walker, 2005; Nguyen et al., 2009; Olander, 2007; Rajablu et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2008; Young, 2006). Moreover, specific attention is given to investigating the explanatory mechanism for stakeholder actions (Hill and Jones, 1992) or predicting when they will act (Rowley and Moldoveanu, 2003) or examining why their actions become influential (King, 2008). There have been only three primary studies concentrating on the actions that stakeholders normally employ to gain influence; two of these are based on social movement theory, while the other is adapted from resource dependence theory.

Hunter et al. (2013) pointed out strategies through which stakeholders use social media to affect firms. These strategies are employed in three consecutive phases: first, they start by broadcasting severe criticism to deride the trustworthiness of their targets; second, they take particular actions to mobilise opposition and spread the issues, while employing the media to increase the effects; and lastly, they ally themselves with other groups to control the agenda.

Zietma and Winn (2008) examined the processes and actions that stakeholders and their targets can use to influence each other, proposing three sequential tactics: issue raising, positioning, and solution seeking. At the beginning, stakeholders attempt to attract public attention and support for their claims. Subsequent to raising issues, they can target at strengthening their position in the struggle. Lastly, solution-seeking tactics, including building consensus, trust, and understanding across the lines, are employed to reach a solution with their opponents.

With the aim to extending the development of stakeholder theory to accommodate the viewpoints from stakeholders, Frooman (1999) developed a typology of stakeholder influence strategies. This typology consists of two important features: the way stakeholders control resources and the path they take to manipulate the supply of resources. When they control a firm's crucial resources, stakeholders can affect the firm by using withholding strategies to change a firm's behaviours by discontinuing the supply of necessary resources. Alternatively, usage strategies are used when stakeholders continue to supply a resource, but with conditions attached to it. These actions can be exerted directly or indirectly depending on four types of resource relationship between the firm and stakeholders: firm power, stakeholder power, high interdependence, and low interdependence. Firms hold power when they are less dependent on stakeholders than stakeholders dependent on them, and vice versa. Furthermore, both parties can be either highly dependent on each other or not very dependent on one another.

While Hunter et al. (2013) focused on stakeholders' communication activities, Zietma and Winn (2008) took a

broader view on stakeholders' actions. Both author groups rely on social movement theory, in which special attention is paid to stakeholders' mechanisms of collective actions in social or political conflicts (see Buechler, 1995; Diani, 2013; Diani and Bison, 2004; Porta and Diani, 2006); therefore, the two studies tend to emphasise processes that help stakeholders gain greater influence. In comparison with those studies, the model of Frooman (1999) provides a deeper understanding of what stakeholders do to influence an organisation, which lays an underlying basis for empirical studies on the stakeholder influence strategies theory (Tsai et al., 2005). In this study, the term 'stakeholder influence strategies' refers to the actions adopted by stakeholders to influence the project and therefore should be distinguished from managers' strategies proposed by Turner (2014).

2.4. Stakeholder influence strategies

Since Frooman proposed the typology in 1999, there have been three main research streams in the literature on stakeholder influence strategies. The first focuses on testing this typology (Elijido-Ten, 2008; Elijido-Ten et al., 2010; Hefferman and O'Brien 2010; Frooman and Murrell, 2003). The second concentrates not only on testing the typology but also on investigating why stakeholders did what they did (Frooman and Murrell, 2005; Hendry, 2005; Tsai et al. 2005; Tsai et al., 2016). The third emphasises particular actions that stakeholders employ to gain greater leverage (Aaltonen et al., 2008; Aaltonen and Kujala, 2010; Hendry, 2005).

To date, only two empirical studies have attempted to specify stakeholders' strategic actions in the third research stream. Hendry (2005) identified nine specific strategies that non-governmental environmental organisations can use to influence businesses. These organisations can employ partnerships, multi-stakeholder dialogue and blockades to change a firm's behaviour. Alternatively, they can persuade potential allies to pressure a firm by using letter-writing campaigns, boycotts, shareholder resolution, lobbying, litigation and communication. Aaltonen et al. (2008) found eight strategies stakeholders can use to increase their salience in global projects. Direct withholding, indirect withholding and resource building are used to boost stakeholders' power, while credibility building and conflict escalation can help stakeholders maximise the legitimacy of their claims. Stakeholders can build a coalition to either increase their power or legitimacy; they pursue direct action to increase the legitimacy. Communication is considered as a means to increase stakeholders' legitimacy and urgency.

Stakeholders' specific actions have been determined by two different approaches. Hendry (2005) embraces the firm-oriented approach of Frooman (1999), paying full attention to the activities that help stakeholders create pressure on a focal organisation. The author classifies the nine strategies into four quadrants of Frooman's framework: direct withholding, indirect withholding, direct usage and indirect usage. Conversely, Aaltonen et al. (2008) mainly adopt the stakeholder-oriented approach of Mitchell et al. (1997), perceiving influence strategies as a means for stakeholders to increase

their prominence in a project network; this, in turn, increases the likelihood of receiving prioritisation from managers. These authors attach stakeholder movements to three attributes: legitimacy, power and urgency. The differences in how researchers approach stakeholder actions lead to the distinctions in how they describe these actions. For instance, Hendry (2005) claims that communication strategy, which includes report production, shareholder resolution, protests and blockades, is a means for stakeholders to gain their potential allies' attention. Nevertheless, Aaltonen et al. (2008) describe communication as a strategy in which stakeholders employ different types of media to communicate and emphasise the legitimacy and urgency of their claims; blockades, protests and the like are included in the direct action. Fig. 1 shows the two distinct approaches to investigating stakeholder strategies.

3. A theoretical framework of stakeholder strategic actions

Empirical data from previous research shows a coexistence between stakeholder-oriented and firm-oriented strategies. For instance, alliance forming, according to Hendry (2005), is not accounted for in influence strategies; the author, however, acknowledges that this type of behaviour is in concert with those strategies. Moreover, some stakeholder salience shaping strategies in the work of Aaltonen et al. (2008), such as direct and indirect withholding, can create direct pressure on a project.

Therefore, both pressurising strategies and salience building activities are taken into consideration in this study. A new theoretical framework was developed and applied to investigate stakeholder strategic actions in construction projects (see Fig. 2).

This framework consists of three generic strategies: direct, lobbying and bolstering. First, stakeholders can exert direct influence on a project since they control essential inputs—the inputs of a construction project comprise not only capital, materials and labour but also site location and building and environmental permits (Project Management Institute, 2016). Second, stakeholders can affect a project indirectly by persuading their potential allies to take action. An indirect strategy, according to Frooman (1999), often entails a communication strategy between stakeholders and their potential allies, and a direct strategy between those allies and the targeted project. It has been conclusively shown that stakeholders have a variety of ways to affect a project indirectly (Aaltonen and Kujala, 2010; Hendry, 2005), thus all specific steps that stakeholders pursue to lobby decision makers- who possess project inputs are categorised into the lobbying group. Third, the bolstering category includes actions that can be used to enhance stakeholder influencing ability; these actions may not create any pressure on projects when being employed independently. Henceforth, the terms 'specific strategies' and 'actions' will be used interchangeably, indicating different stakeholders' influence strategies within each category.

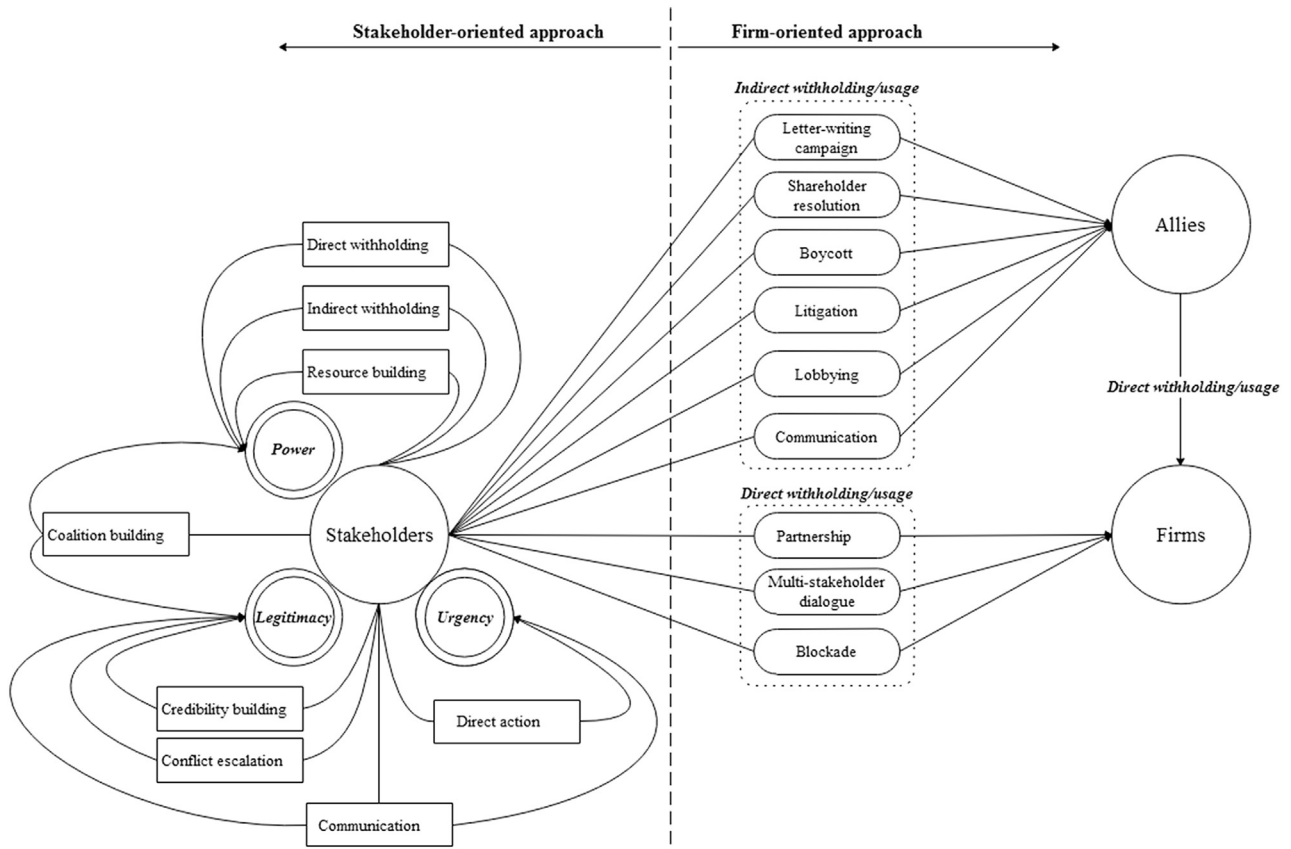


Fig. 1. A synthesis of stakeholders' specific influence strategies.

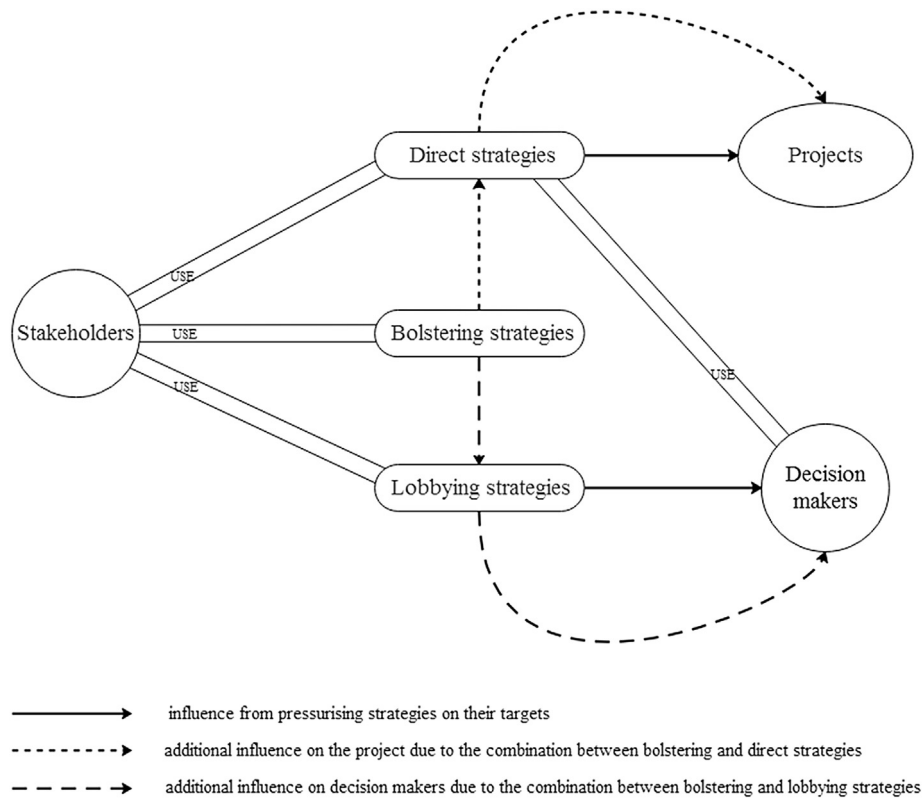


Fig. 2. A theoretical framework of stakeholder strategic actions.

4. Research methodology

A case study design, according to Yin (2013), is used to examine a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context; this enables researchers to cope with the subtleties and intricacies of complex social circumstances (Denscombe, 2010). In addition, multiple-case is a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of research findings (Merriam, 1998). Therefore, a multiple case study in the Vietnamese construction industry was conducted for this study.

4.1. Selection criteria

Frooman (1999)’s typology is built on resource dependence theory which focuses primarily on non-negotiated conflicts between firms and stakeholders, and which holds that power will be a critical determinant for resolving the conflicts. This study focuses on external stakeholders who are against a project in such situations. Given that stakeholders may or may not succeed in creating pressure, we only centre on the actions that can materially impact a project. Fourteen cases under external stakeholders’ influence, having issues such as changes, delays, and even cancellations, were taken into consideration. The benefits of a multiple case study are reduced if the number of cases is less than four (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 2013). Therefore, four cases were selected according to two main criteria: unique and diverse. Considering two possible combinations illustrated in the theoretical framework, the selected

cases needed to be unique, where at least two distinct generic strategies existed—namely direct-bolstering or lobbying-bolstering. Furthermore, these cases needed to be diverse in terms of location, project type and the effect on stakeholders. By adopting the diversification approach, we aimed to increase the generalisability of selected cases to similar situations where external stakeholders employ multiple influence actions (see Seawright and Gerring, 2008).

4.2. Case description

Case 1. Dong Nai riverside residential project was approved by Dong Nai authorities and was invested by Toan Think Phat Corporation. It was located on the basin of the Dong Nai River, stretching over 1.3 km along the river with a total area of 8.4 ha. Vietnam Rivers Network (VRN), a nongovernmental environmental organisation, had fiercely opposed the project owing to dumping of sand and rocks into the river for site preparation. As a result, this project was suspended.

Case 2. Sam Son’s coastal tourism space was a Public Private Partnership project between FLC Corporation and Sam Son Town. It was approved by the government of Thanh Hoa Province. Local authorities intended to relocate current ports to renovate 3.5 km coastal area into a tourism complex. Since the relocation would affect the income and jobs of their families, the fishermen took many actions to pressurise the authorities to save a few spots for their fishing activities. As a consequence, the project masterplan was changed.

Case 3. Dong Nai 6 and 6A hydropower projects were funded by Duc Long Gia Lai Corporation; planned construction sites were situated near the core area of Cat Tien National Park. A strong alliance was made between Vietnam Rivers Network (VRN), Dong Nai authorities and Saving Cat Tien (SCT) in the fight against these hydropower plants due to concerns about potential environmental damage. For three consecutive years, the objectors prevailed on national authorities to withhold investment approvals. Eventually, the two projects were cancelled by the Prime Minister. It should be noted that these projects were a result of the separation of a larger project, and due to being challenged at the same time, they are also considered as a unit of analysis for other cases.

Case 4. Hoa Xuan ecological urban project, located on Cam Le District, Da Nang city, was funded by Sun Group Corporation. The city government was primarily responsible for site clearance, compensation and relocation of residents' dwellings. More than 2000 households in the villages of Cam Chanh, Tung Lam, Lo Giang, Trung Luong and Con Dau had been removed since 2010 to make way for this project; among these were 420 Catholic families that lived near the local church in Con Dau. The disagreements concerning compensation and relocation between the families and local authorities had affected the project negatively.

The environmental damage and displacement of local families are two major adverse impacts of the selected cases, as well as for many other construction projects having stakeholder-related issues in Vietnam—there have been many instances of deficiencies and inappropriate implementation of Vietnamese government's policies in environment protection (Ortmann, 2017; Slunge and Tran, 2014) and compensation and relocation (Nguyen et al., 2016; To et al., 2015; Labbé, 2015). In addition, stakeholder consultation during the development of construction projects has been conducted inadequately, leading to the exclusion of important external stakeholders (Ha-Duong et al., 2016; Kerkvliet, 2014). As a result, these stakeholders are usually positioned against such projects. In only one out of the four cases, stakeholders possess project inputs and thus are capable of influencing. Nevertheless, due to considerable benefits of construction projects in speeding urbanisation and economic growth, the government is more likely to support the owners (Huu et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2017). The objectors in all cases, therefore, did not have much power at the beginning of their appeals.

4.3. Data collection

Two distinct types of data had been collected by the first researcher from November 2015 to August 2016. Archival records are the principle source of data since they are a crucial tool of data collection for case study research (Mills et al., 2010); this archival data was mostly acquired from online newspapers. Based upon newspaper reports, external objectors, who had high frequencies of occurrence in the news and perceived that their missions or interests are affected by the project, were identified

in each case for examination of their actions. These main objectors were verified by further interviews to make sure that no important group was missed out. Interviews—the second source of data—were conducted in a semi-structured manner thanks to their adaptability (see Bell, 2010). The majority of participants were opposing stakeholders, given the main parties involved in the conflicts had already been approached. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Fig. 3 summarises the profiles of interviews and archival records collected over the four cases.

Since online newspapers are the main source of data in all cases, the choice of stories to be covered and the textual detail in the news reports can be biased (Yin, 2011); such biases are minimised by collection of newspapers with various levels of readership, coverage, and attitude concerning the projects (see Grey, 2010; Jacobs, 1996; Martin, 2005; Strawn, 2008). In Case 1, for instance, Thanh Nien is a national newspaper, criticising this project for environmental damages, while Dong Nai represents the viewpoint of provincial authorities who support the project. The biases can also be reduced by consulting non-press sources (Barranco and Wisler, 1999; Almeida and Lichbach, 2003). Therefore, additional archival data—such as petitions and official documents—and interviews are included in every case. Importantly, the number of news reports mostly depends on the duration of the conflicts. For example, there are in total 38 articles in Case 2 as the struggle of the fishermen only lasted within two weeks. Conversely, the quantity of articles in Case 3, in which the objectors had fought for three consecutive years, is 246 in total.

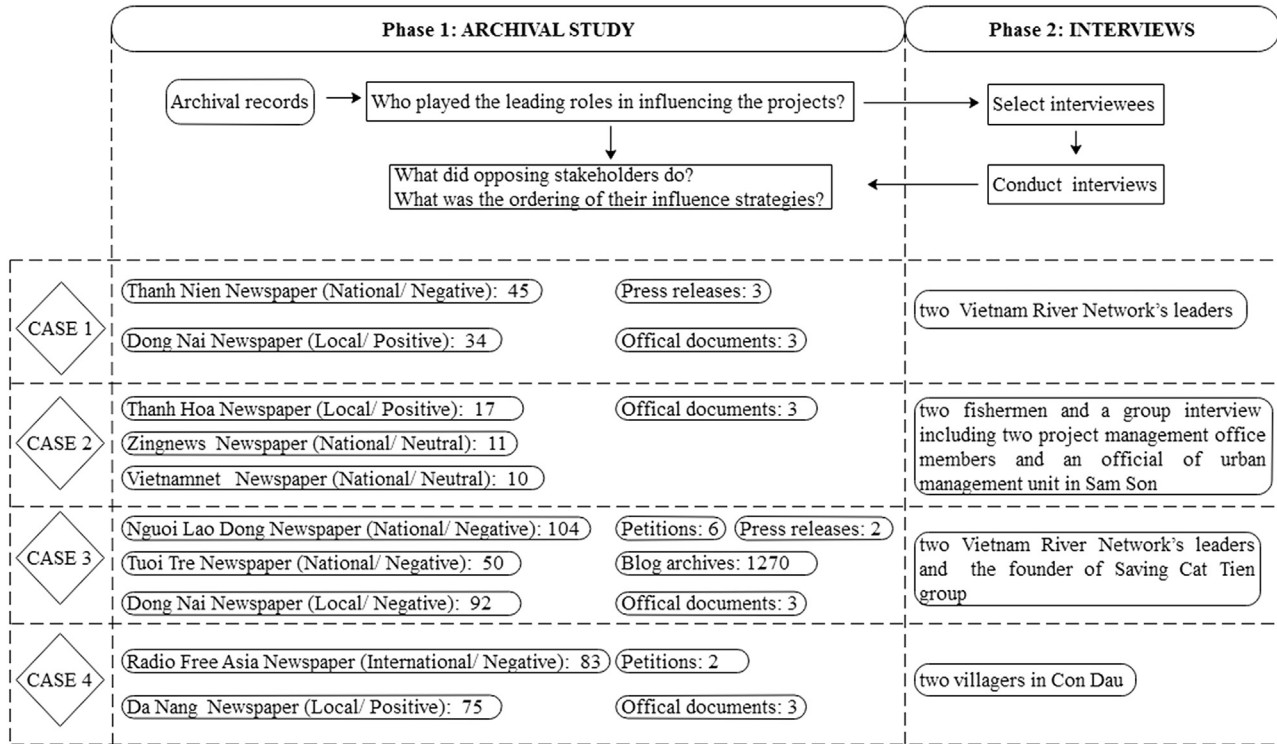
4.4. Data analysis

The data analysis process of this study consists of six steps: activity identifying, categorising, coding, theme ordering, and within-case and cross-case analyses. Based on archival records stakeholders' activities in every case were initially identified and then confirmed by interviews. Regarding three generic categories in the theoretical framework, all activities from four cases were classified into direct, lobbying and bolstering. Within each category, the activities having similar characteristics were then grouped in a specific strategy theme. As the themes were mostly based on past studies presented in Fig. 1, the provisional coding technique was used (see Saldana, 2009). Specific strategies were subsequently presented in sequential orders for examining potential combinations. The data analysis method in this research follows the guideline of Stake (2013) and Miles et al. (2014). The results from each case are presented separately, followed by cross-case analyses.

5. Findings

5.1. Coding

Since stakeholders possess a project's initial inputs, they can affect it directly by withholding these inputs or allow the inputs to be employed with conditions. In Case 4, Con Dau's villagers



LEGEND

Title (Level of the newspaper/ Attitude against the project): Quantities of articles

Fig. 3. Data collection process.

hindered the project by using land withholding and compromising actions. Some villagers declined to move, while the others asserted that they only go with higher compensations. In other cases, stakeholders did not hold any project inputs and hence could not use direct strategies. Instead, they convinced decision makers—namely national and provincial authorities—who control construction approvals to influence those projects. Case 2 is a Public Private Partnership project between FLC

Corporation and Sam Son Town; through this relationship the provincial authorities are able change the projects scope by exerting power over the township government. Table 1 summarises two specific influence strategies within the direct category.

As shown in Table 2, stakeholders can pursue communication and direct action to lobby decision makers to take action. In the first specific strategy, stakeholders can send petitions

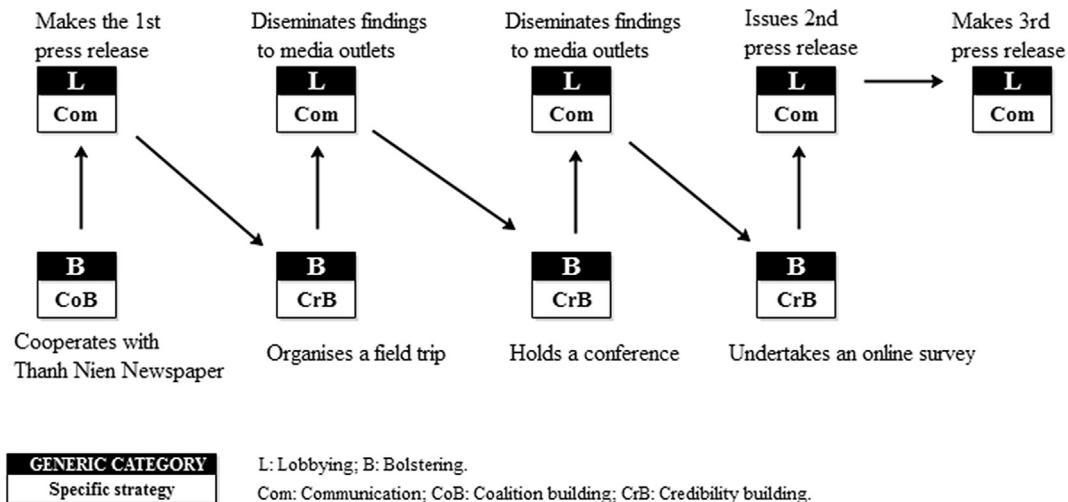


Fig. 4. Main strategic activities of VRN in chronological sequence.

Table 1
Stakeholders' specific strategies within the direct category.

Theme	Stakeholders	Activity	Case			
			1	2	3	4
Inputs withholding	Villagers	Withhold their properties due to disagreements on relocation.				●
	National authorities	Revoke the investment permits.			●	
Inputs compromising	Villagers	Agree to transfer their lands only with higher compensations.				●
	National authorities	Suspend the project for a thorough investigation.	●			
	Provincial authorities	Change project scope as a result of the fishermen's pressure.		●		

Table 2
Stakeholders' specific strategies within the lobbying category.

Theme	Stakeholders	Activity	Case			
			1	2	3	4
Communication	Villagers	- Communicate to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam.				●
		- Send petitions to the Central Citizen Reception Department.				
	VRN	- Send petitions the Prime Minister, the National Assembly and relevant Ministries.				
		- Makes three press releases petitioning provincial and national authorities to stop the project.		●		
Fishermen Dong Nai authorities SCT	Petition local and provincial authorities to leave spaces for their fishing activities.	- Spreads the findings from the field trip and conference to news agencies.				●
		- Sends petitions to national departments and Ministries involved in the environmental impact assessment of two projects.				
		- Voices opposition in two press releases.				
		- Sends the findings from the field trips, conferences to media outlets.				
Direct action	Villagers	- Send petitions to the Central Government.				●
		- Use Dong Nai newspaper to raise the awareness of locals.				●
	Fishermen	- Sends petitions to national authorities				
		- Communicates the issues to the public via its own website, blog, Facebook pages and photo exhibitions.				
Fishermen	- Attempt to bury the remains of a parishioner at a closed cemetery located within the project site, leading to violent clashes.				●	
	- Protest, demonstrate and block main roads in the capital of Thanh Hoa Province, resulting in authorities' attention and concession.		●			

and/or use the media to bring projects' negative impacts to decision makers' attention. The authorities in all cases received requests for action directly in petitions; nevertheless, they also received the messages indirectly from the media. In the second strategy, stakeholders aim to suspend a project and capture decision makers' attention by taking collective actions in temporary gatherings, for instance, demonstrations and protests of the fishermen in [Case 2](#).

Three specific strategies were identified within the bolstering category, including coalition building, credibility building and conflict escalation (see [Table 3](#)). First, stakeholders can form coalitions with other opposing groups, such as the alliance between Con Dau and Trung Luong villagers in [Case 4](#), and/or with media agencies, for instance, VRN and Thanh Nien in [Case 1](#). Second, stakeholders' trustworthiness can be established via concrete evidence and experts' judgements that support their claims and via the participation of credible individuals. Evidence is collected mainly from field trips, online campaigns and surveys, whereas experts' judgements are assembled in conferences. SCT, an activists' group in [Case 3](#), built its reputation by engaging credible specialists in the advisory board. Third, they can engage possible objectors in a project by attaching new issues to the original conflict. For instance, the fishermen in [Case 2](#)

attempted to connect their children's school interruption to the project's adverse consequences, intensifying the conflict over relocating fishing ports.

5.2. Within-case analysis

5.2.1. Case 1

As it does not hold any project input, VRN only used two generic strategies: lobbying and bolstering. Communication strategy, which includes issuing press releases and disseminating findings to news agencies, was used to lobby national authorities to cancel the project. VRN enhanced the effect of this strategy by cooperating with Thanh Nien newspaper and by using persuasive evidence to strengthen its credibility. [Fig. 5](#) illustrates VRN's of main strategic activities in chronological sequence. Two combinations of influence strategies were found, including communication- coalition building and communication- credibility building.

5.2.2. Case 2

Sam Son's fishermen used lobbying and bolstering strategies simultaneously in their struggle by pursuing communication and direct action to pressurise Thanh Hoa authorities. Initially, they communicated their needs and requirements to all

Table 3
Stakeholders' specific strategies within the bolstering category.

Theme	Stakeholders	Activity	Case			
			1	2	3	4
Coalition building	Villagers	Form alliance with some Trung Luong's villagers				●
	VRN	Collaborates with Thanh Nien Newspaper Cooperates with Dong Nai authorities, SCT and Tuoi Tre newspaper	●		●	
Credibility building	Dong Nai authorities	Cooperate with VRN and SCT				
	SCT	Forms alliances with Dong Nai authorities, VRN and Nguoi Lao Dong newspaper				
	VRN	- Conducts a field trip to collect evidence supporting it claim. - Organises an environmental conference. - Surveys residents near the construction site and internet users. - Conducts two field trips to collect evidence against the environmental impact assessments. - Organises environmental conferences to point out adversarial impacts and legal issues of the projects	●			
	Dong Nai authorities	Hold a scientific conference to investigate negative environmental impacts of the two projects.				
Conflict escalation	SCT	- Conducts a survey with residents near projects' sites. - Collects online signatures to protest the government cancel two projects. - Engages credible scientists and experts in the group.				
	Villagers	Involve international organisations to the project by accusing the government of abusing the human and religious rights.				●
	Fishermen	Encourage their children leave schools to take part in the struggle.		●		

levels of the provincial government. Since their voice had not been heard, the fishermen organised demonstrations, protests and blockades in Thanh Hoa's capital; they also manipulated their children to leave schools and take part in the crowd to increase pressure on provincial authorities. Fig. 6 presents the series of fishermen's main strategic activities. They succeeded in pressurising the authorities by combining direct action with conflict escalation effectively.

5.2.3. Case 3

Dong Nai authorities, VRN and SCT all employed lobbying and bolstering strategy concurrently as none of them hold any essential input into the two projects. Communication was the only strategy used to lobby for cancelling the projects, consisting of making press releases, sending petitions and conducting mass media campaigns. The objectors intensified the effect of communication strategy by forming alliances with other opposing groups and new agencies and by building the credibility of their claims. Based on the strategic activities of Dong Nai authorities, VRN and SCT in Fig. 7, two combinations of influence strategies were found:

communication- coalition building and communication- credibility building.

5.2.4. Case 4

Con Dau's villagers pursued all three generic strategies in their two-phase struggle. After using direct strategies to pressurise the local government, they combined lobbying with bolstering to engage national authorities in the project. Following an unsuccessful attempt to get national authorities' attention via communication, they attempted to bury the remains of a parishioner at a closed cemetery located within the project site, leading to violent clashes. Following that incident, they accused the government of abusing their human and religious rights, resulting in debates between international organisations and the Vietnamese government. Consequently, national authorities had to step in. The villagers then maintained the pressure on the national government by forming an alliance with some Trung Luong' residents, sending petitions regularly. As shown in Fig. 8, the villagers selected two different combinations: direct action- conflict escalation in phase 1 and coalition building- communication in phase 2.

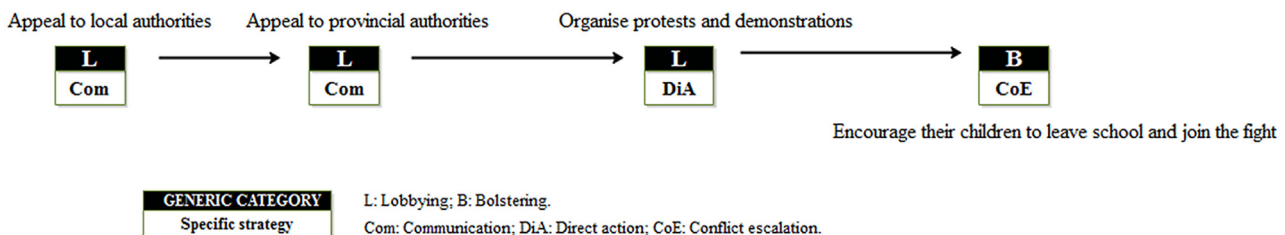


Fig. 5. Sam Son fishermen's main strategic activities of in chronological order.

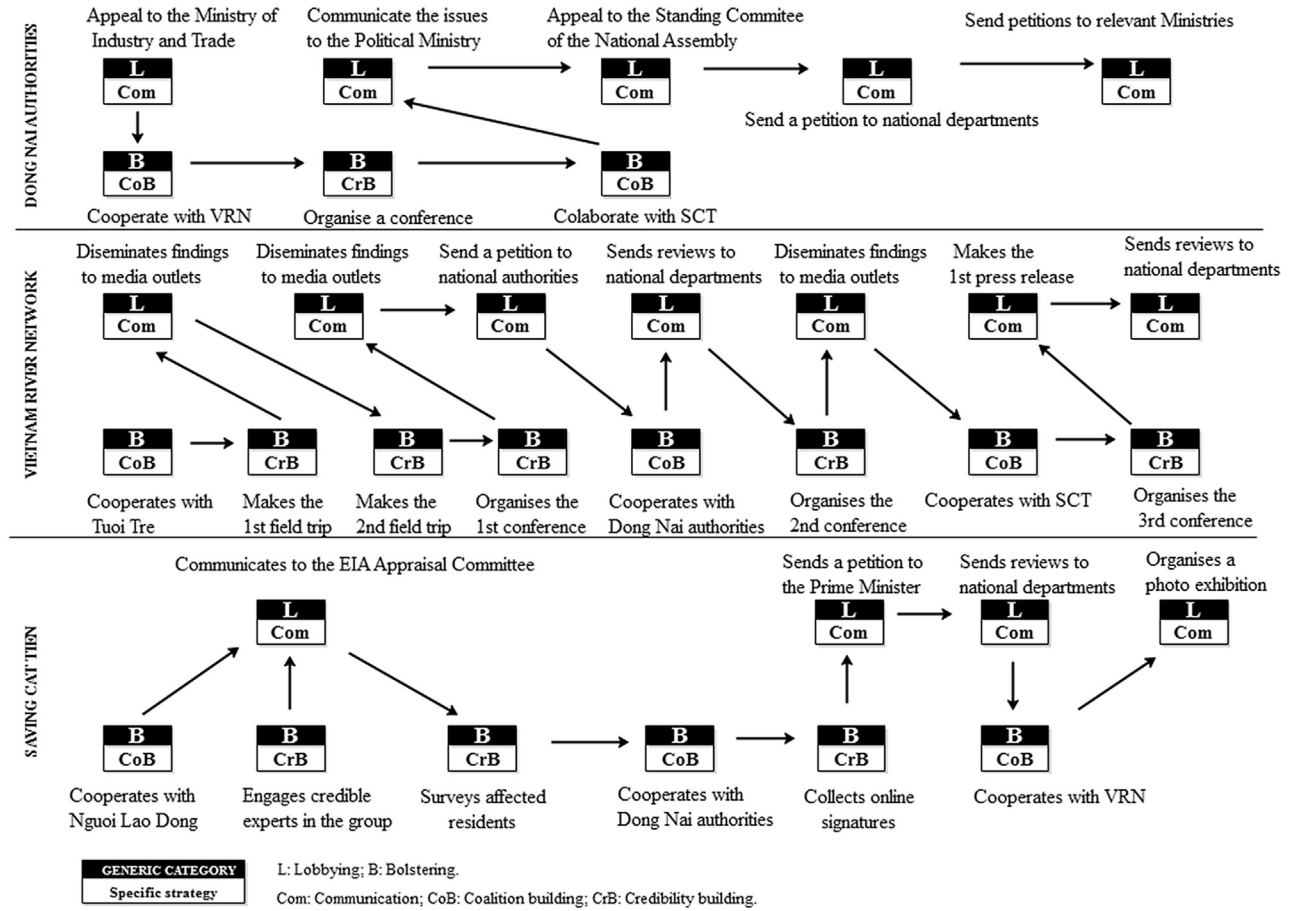


Fig. 6. Main strategic activities of Dong Nai authorities, VRN and SCT in sequential order.

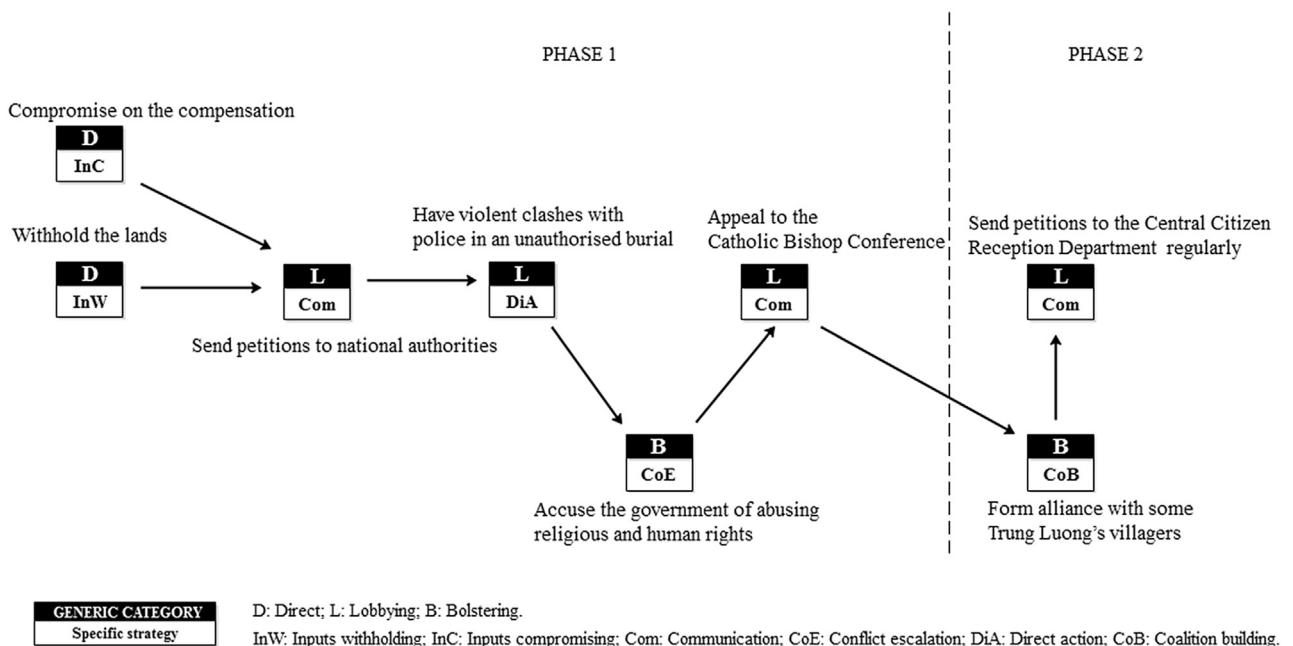


Fig. 7. Con Dau villagers' strategic activities in sequential order.

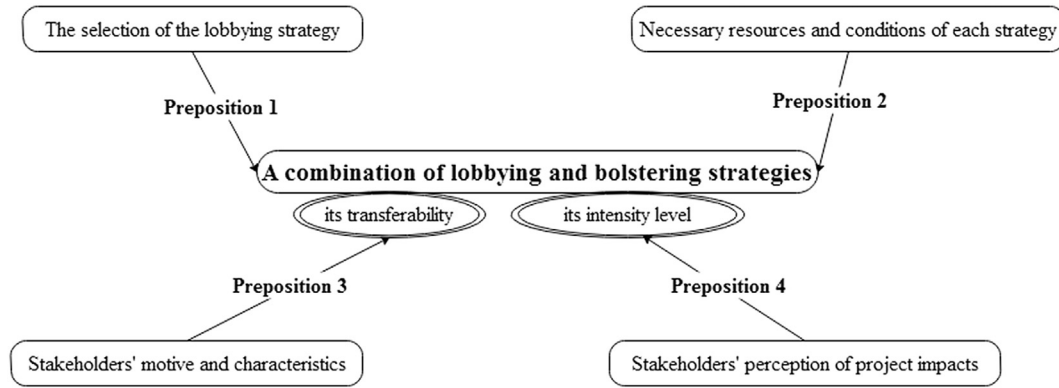


Fig. 8. Factors affecting the combination of lobbying and bolstering strategies.

5.3. Cross-case analysis

When stakeholders do not hold any inputs in Cases 1, 2 and 3, they used lobbying and bolstering at the same time. All three generic strategies were identified in Case 4, in which the villagers possessed lands required for the project implementation. Direct strategies mainly target the local government, while the others aim at national authorities. Even though direct strategies are in concert with the possession of project inputs, their effect may vary depending on the inputs' characteristic. For instance, the hydropower stations in Case 3 were cancelled since national authorities had withheld the planning approvals, while the urban project in Case 4 was only partially affected by the villagers' lands withholding. Lobbying and bolstering are used together in circumstances where stakeholders are not sufficiently able to influence projects considerably.

Three combinations of specific strategies were used by two distinct stakeholder groups (see Table 4). The first group, including VRN, SCT and Dong Nai authorities, is organised and has sufficient resources, expertise and knowledge. Conversely, the second is unorganised, comprising a large number of members who mostly have low levels of income and education, such as villagers and fishermen. The former group

pursued communication and credibility building concurrently in cases affecting the environment, whereas the latter exerted direct action and conflict escalation together in cases leading to displacements of the locals. The combination of communication and coalition building was used by both groups, existing in both situations where projects result in adverse impacts on either the environment or the locals.

6. Discussion

Despite differences as a result of adopting a diversification approach in the case selection process, there are some similarities between pairs of cases. In particular, the objectors in Cases 2 and 4 are unorganised groups, including fishermen and villagers, while in other cases stakeholders are organised groups, such as environmental organisations and activists. In addition, Cases 2 and 4 lead to the displacements of neighbouring residents, whereas Cases 1 and 3 were criticised for environmental damages. In only one out of four cases, objectors possess project inputs and thus are capable of influencing. Although Vietnam is a one-party socialist state, in which the Central government has tremendous influence on all aspects of the development of projects (see Croissant and

Table 4
A summary of common combinations of stakeholder influence strategies.

Combination	Stakeholder group		Project impact	
	Organised	Unorganised	Environmental damages	Displacements of the locals
<i>Credibility building and communication:</i> Before communicating a project's adverse impacts to decision makers, stakeholders often build the credibility of their claims by assembling concrete evidences and experts' judgements and involving credible specialists in their organisations.	✓		✓	
<i>Direct action and conflict escalation:</i> After taking collective actions in temporary gatherings to suspend a project and get decision makers' attention, stakeholders normally escalate the conflict to involve other potential adversarial participants in the project.		✓		✓
<i>Coalition building and communication:</i> Stakeholders form alliances with other adversarial groups and communicate a project's negative impacts to decision makers at the same time.	✓	✓	✓	✓

Lorenz, 2018; Labbé and Musil, 2014; Nguyen, 2017; Phuc et al., 2014), governmental authorities are more likely to support the owners due to the crucial role of construction projects in boosting urbanisation and economic growth (Huu et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2017). In short: objectors were put at a disadvantage even at the beginning of their appeals.

Encountering such unfavourable situations, stakeholders can pressurise projects by using laws relating to the development of construction projects, for example, compensation and relocation, environment protection and building permits (see Hill and Jones, 1992). Moreover, the legitimacy of management's decisions (Tsai et al. 2005) and stakeholder claims (Aaltonen et al., 2008; Zietsma and Winn, 2008) are important influencing factors. The external stakeholders in this study did not take any legal action possibly due to deficiencies in the Vietnamese laws and regulations and the lack of experience (Hendry, 2005; Frooman and Murrell, 2005). Alternatively, they aimed at persuading and even pressurising decision makers, who possess essential project inputs, to take action. Although objectors' capability of influencing was limited due to their characteristics and the social context, they eventually succeeded in creating material impacts on projects; such impacts stem from the inadequacy in consulting external stakeholders as discussed previously. The findings of this study are exemplars of why the management for stakeholder approach should be adopted.

6.1. Propositions development: factors affecting the combination of lobbying and bolstering strategies

As shown in the theoretical framework, the main difference among direct, lobbying and bolstering strategies lies at the targets. The first category aims at projects, the second targets decision makers and the third concentrates on the two pressuring strategies. There is no substantial evidence on the collaboration of direct and bolstering strategies. Nevertheless, lobbying and bolstering were employed together in all cases. Based on the cross-case results and most findings from previous works adopting stakeholder theory, we develop four propositions concerning the cooperation of these strategies; the development of these propositions is also supported by some social movement studies (see Hunter et al., 2013; King, 2008; Porta and Diani, 2006; Zietsma and Winn, 2008). Fig. 8 illustrates four factors affecting the use of a combination between lobbying and bolstering strategies.

Employing multiple strategies, as Hendry (2005) asserts, can provide stakeholders greater influence and facilitate success. We believe that combining lobbying and bolstering strategies helps stakeholders to maximise the pressure on decision makers, and that each combination serves a particular purpose. As communication is the main pressurising strategy, coalition building can help objectors intensify the pressure by unifying opposing voices and by ensuring media agencies will spread the messages. Combining communication with credibility building can help stakeholders increase the probability of persuading decision makers successfully via convincing evidence. Stakeholders may combine direct action and conflict

escalation to express stiff opposition and attract decision makers' attention at the earliest opportunity. Another combination can be found in the work of Zietsma and Winn (2008), where the authors observe that environmentalists employed direct action and alliance forming concurrently in the fights against forest companies. Previous studies have shown that the selection of a strategy is determined by stakeholders' experience and expertise, as well as external factors, such as potential allies and institutional environments (see Aaltonen and Kujala, 2016; Frooman and Murrell, 2005; Hendry, 2005). Regarding combinations of influence strategies, we emphasise that the interrelationship between the two generic strategies is also a crucial factor. Thus, we propose that:

P1. *When lobbying is combined with a bolstering strategy, the selection of the former affects the selection of the latter.*

In the lobbying category, communication is more popular than direct action; this may be due to the amount of effort required. Almost all stakeholders are capable of sending petitions or employing the media to lobby decision makers; the required effort may be minimal. Conversely, they must have access to different resources when applying direct actions (Porta and Diani, 2006; Rowley and Moldoveanu, 2003). As shown in previous case studies of Aaltonen and Kujala (2010) and Jordhus-Lier (2015), objectors can use such actions regularly due to possessing adequate resources. Furthermore, there are important distinctions among three specific strategies in the bolstering category. To build their credibility, stakeholders have to spend considerable time and effort for such activities as organising field trips and conferences, and they must also count on necessary prerequisites to escalate the original conflict into something far more serious. For example, the villagers in Case 4 used violent clashes with police officers as a fact to accuse local authorities of abusing religion and human rights. Since stakeholders may not experience the costs of establishing a new relationship (Mintzberg 1983 cited in Rowley, 1997), coalition building is their favourite option in the bolstering category. It should be noted that while other combinations were limited to specific groups, coalition building and communication were widely employed. This employment can also be found in previous studies of Aaltonen and Kujala (2010) and Hunter et al. (2013). Past studies have shown that stakeholders tend to select the strategy which offers the best value for money (Frooman and Murrell, 2005; Hendry, 2005). We believe that this tendency still holds true in the combination of influence strategies and therefore propose that:

P2. *The fewer resources and conditions lobbying and bolstering actions require, the more likely they are used together.*

It should be noted that communication and credibility building were only used together by organised groups, while direct action was solely combined with conflict escalation in unorganised groups. According to Rowley and Moldoveanu (2003), the former groups can be classified as identity-based, whereas the latter groups can be interest-based. The authors also assert that interest- and identity-based motive may lead to different types of action. Similarly, the differences between

informal and hierarchical organisations can lead to differences in the effect of their influence strategies (King, 2008). In addition, not all forms of action can be carried on from one group to another, due to the limitations of time, space and cultural and material resources (Porta and Diani, 2006). We believe that the motives and characteristics of a stakeholder group can limit the transferability of its actions to other group and hence propose that:

P3. *Stakeholders' motives and characteristics are determinants for the transferability of a combination of lobbying and bolstering strategies.*

The intensity of influence strategies and the changes in these strategies, as Aaltonen and Kujala (2016) point out, are key elements of stakeholder dynamism. The intensity of direct action- conflict escalation seems to be higher than other combinations; this combination was only used in two cases affecting the locals (2 and 4), while communication- coalition building and communication- credibility building were used in two cases having environmental damages (1 and 3). Compared with other cases in which stakeholders selected only one type of lobbying strategy in the combinations, Case 4 is an exception, where the villagers used direct action- conflict escalation in the first phase and communication- coalition building in the second phase. Due to the lack of environmental awareness (Dieu, 2006; Thuy et al., 2008), the vast majority of project stakeholders in Vietnam has only taken intense collective actions in cases where their lives are affected negatively by displacements (see Gillespie, 2014; Kerkvliet, 2014; Labbé, 2015). Conversely, such actions are prevalent in countries where the public has high environmental concerns (see Aaltonen et al., 2015; Porta and Diani, 2006; Zietsma and Winn, 2008). Also, recent studies have shown that stakeholders' reaction depends on how they perceive the impacts of a project (Maddaloni and Davis, 2018; Valentin et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2016). The adverse effect of a construction project on local populations becomes visible as it progresses; therefore, the stakeholders in Cases 2 and 4 reacted intensively to show opposition and get attention from authorities as soon as possible. We believe that there is a connection between the intensity of stakeholders' actions and their perception of project impacts and hence propose the following:

P4. *The more visible and significant impacts of a project stakeholders perceive, the more intense combinations of strategies they pursue to influence decision makers.*

Understanding how stakeholders can affect project outcomes is crucial to stakeholder management and formulating risk response strategies (Nguyen et al., 2018b; Xia et al., 2018). Such understanding can be gained by investigating what strategies stakeholders normally pursue and what factors affect the selection of stakeholder influence strategies (Frooman, 1999). The former question is a prerequisite for examining the latter and thus has received the most attention from researchers (cf Aaltonen and Kujala, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2018a; Sallinen et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2015). Therefore, there is a need for better comprehension of factors affecting and driving the project stakeholders' behaviour (Eskerod and Larsen, 2018). Few studies attempted to explore determinants of influence

strategy selection (Frooman and Murrell, 2005; Hendry, 2005); however, those studies only focus on the conflict between environmental organisations and corporates, in which the connection between specific strategies and the determinants may not be very clear. The present study appears to be the first comprehensive investigation of factors affecting combinations of stakeholder influence strategies in projects. The research findings may be of assistance to making "it more likely to predict stakeholder behaviour, or at least be prepared for more potential behaviours from the stakeholder" (Eskerod and Larsen, 2018, p. 167). The findings also provide new insights into factors contributing to stakeholder dynamics (see Aaltonen et al., 2015).

7. Practical implications

Although external stakeholders may not necessarily hold any project input, they can still affect projects considerably by combining bolstering and lobbying strategies. Managers, therefore, should not underestimate their influence on projects. Furthermore, bolstering actions may not create any strong pressure on projects when being employed independently—nevertheless, they can be drastic if combined with pressurising strategies. Neutralising bolstering actions may help minimise drastic effect of such combinations. For example, when stakeholders organise protests and demonstrations, a manager can compromise and suppress the opposition at the earliest opportunity, stopping the conflict from escalating. Gathering and disseminating evidence that supports the project's legitimacy and benefits may be a solution for dealing with situations where objectors use credibility building to boost their communication strategy.

A project team can adequately respond to stakeholders by taking factors that affect the combinations into consideration. For instance, when local communities pursue intense actions, they may have inaccurate perceptions of the project impacts; however, managers can establish new communication channels to provide correct information about the project rather than devise suppression tactics. Similarly, environmental groups may need more time and resources to organise protests and escalate the conflict than local communities having a large number of residents; managers can predict the timing of influences of a combination by considering necessary resources and conditions of strategies and objectors' characteristics, coming up with timely solutions afterwards.

In addition to using counter-strategies, project managers may pursue a defensive tactic while under stakeholder pressure. As evident from the cases, the direct influence on projects mainly arises from decision makers. Forging a strong relationship with decision makers can help managers to mitigate such negative influence and deliver a project successfully. However, as the inadequacy in stakeholder consultation is an underlying cause of problems in most of the cases, we highlight the need for full and honest engagement with all stakeholders.

8. Conclusions

Little attention has been given to studying situations where external stakeholders pursue multiple strategies to influence a project. Furthermore, due to their adverse influences on building projects, there is a need for an appropriate understanding of what these stakeholders can do to create such influences. This study set out to investigate prevalent combinations of strategies that external stakeholders can use to affect construction projects, and to hypothesise determinants for the use of these combinations. A theoretical framework of stakeholder strategic actions was developed and applied. The multiple case study approach was employed, including four case studies in the Vietnamese construction industry.

Although seven stakeholder-specific influence strategies were found, only five of these were used together in three different pairs. Communication and credibility building were exerted together by organised groups in cases having negative impacts on the environment. Direct action and conflict escalation were employed concurrently by unorganised groups in cases leading to displacement of local people. Coalition building was combined with communication by both groups regardless of projects' impacts. We propose that the use of a combination is affected by the selection of lobbying actions and characteristics of two individual strategies as well as stakeholders' motives, attributes and perceptions of project impacts.

9. Limitations and future directions

This study has some limitations. First, one of the shortcomings of archival records—the major source of data—is identifying their authenticity and accuracy (Merriam, 1998). We chose at least two different newspapers and collected additional sources of information such as government documents and blogs in every case to counteract these biases. Second, there is potentially another source of bias since most of the interviewees are objectors. Third, the findings of this study can only be generalised to projects in similar contexts when the case study methodology was used to investigate stakeholder strategic actions in conflict circumstances.

There is little opportunity for investigating the combination of direct and bolstering strategies in this study because the cases where stakeholders possessed project inputs are limited. Furthermore, the influence strategies' duration and effect over time have not been taken into consideration. For instance, the fishermen in Case 2 had demonstrated and protested for more than a week, whereas the direct action of villagers in Case 4 only occurred in one day. Also, the villagers' inputs withholding strategies had affected the project since 2010, while the effect of their direct action only lasted for a very short period. Future studies taking these issues into account should be conducted.

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