BRIDGING POLICY IMPLEMENTATION GAP THROUGH PUBLIC PROJECTS:
FROM POLICY ASPIRATION TO IMPLEMENTATION TO ACTUAL POLICY IMPACTS

Insights from a PhD Research

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FUNDING & SUPPORT

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Interdisciplinary approach bridging project management and policy implementation.

Research Gap: Little research on dynamic policy implementation's impact on policy/project success.

Engagement with key stakeholders across all aspects of public projects

Public policies are crafted with the **best intentions**—address pressing issues, improve lives, & build a better future.

But a gap often exists between aspirations and actual practice – **IMPLEMENTATION GAP**

Example: High-speed rail project meant to improve connectivity and boost economic growth. Challenges: delays, cost overruns, public scrutiny, and ***drift from the original vision.***

CONTEXT OF PUBLIC POLICIES DEVELOPMENT & IMPLEMENTATION
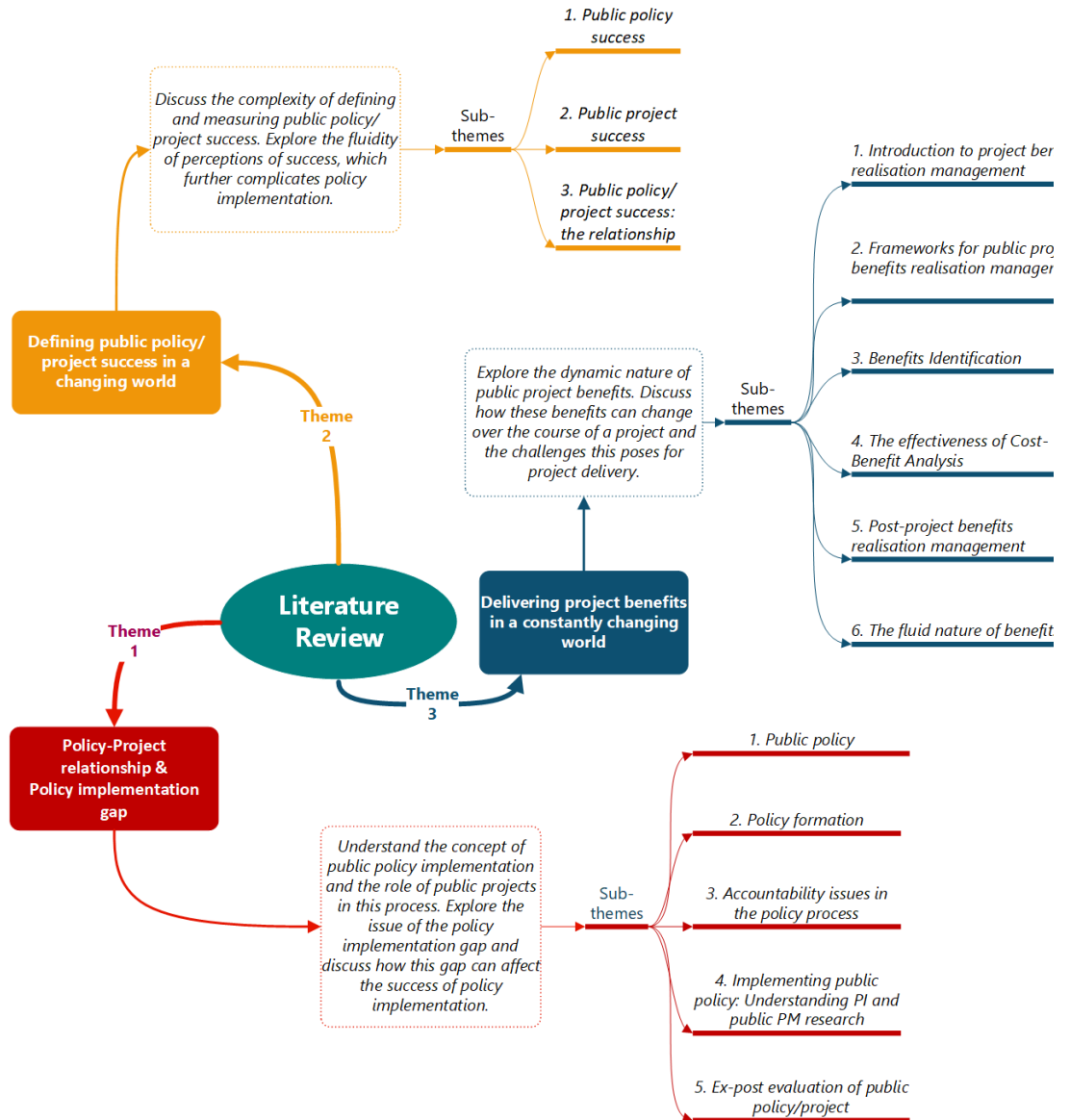
RESEARCH MOTIVATION

Motivated to understand why gaps occur and how to address them.

Challenges are complex:

- shifting political priorities,
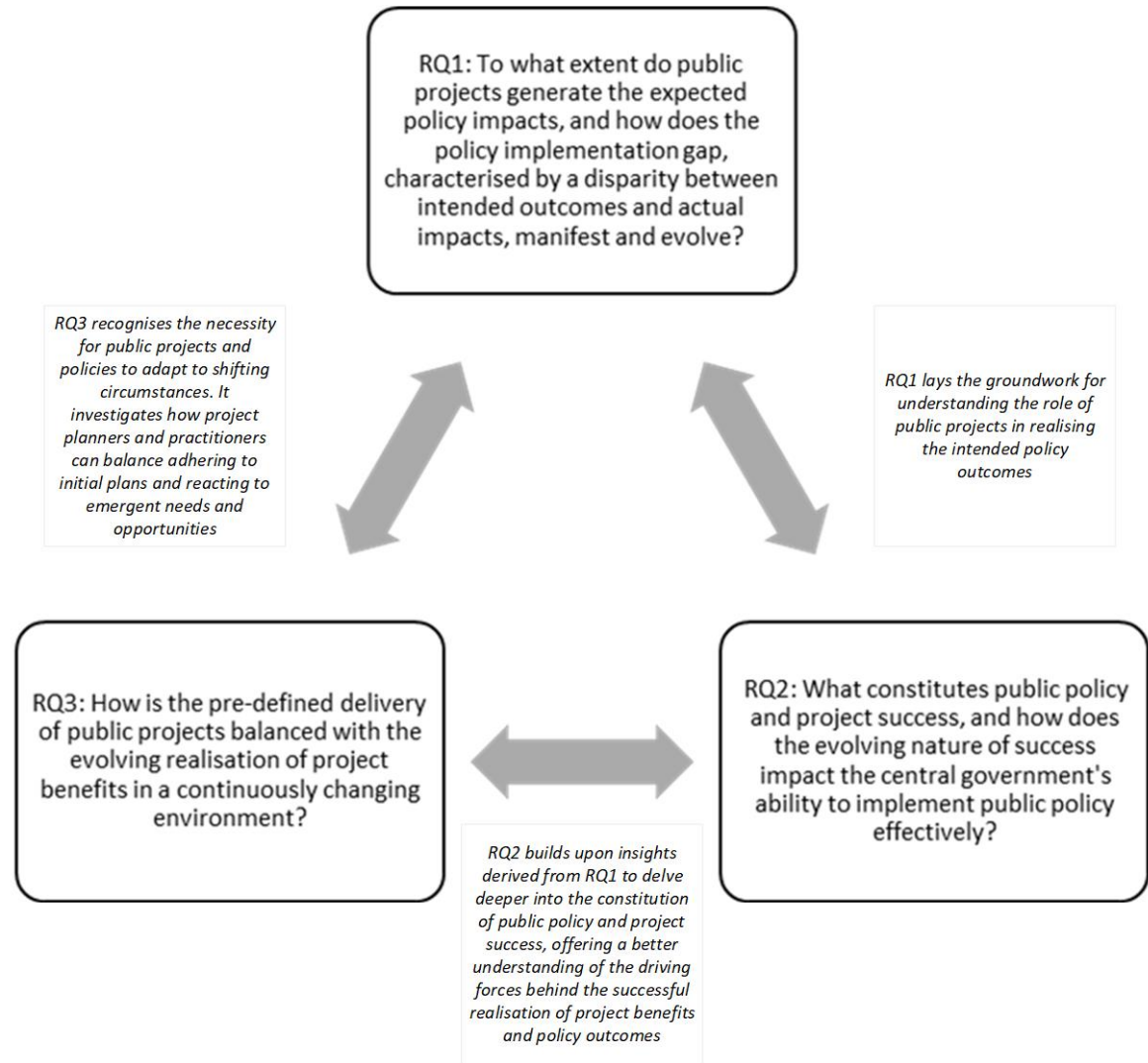- economic fluctuations,
- unforeseen difficulties

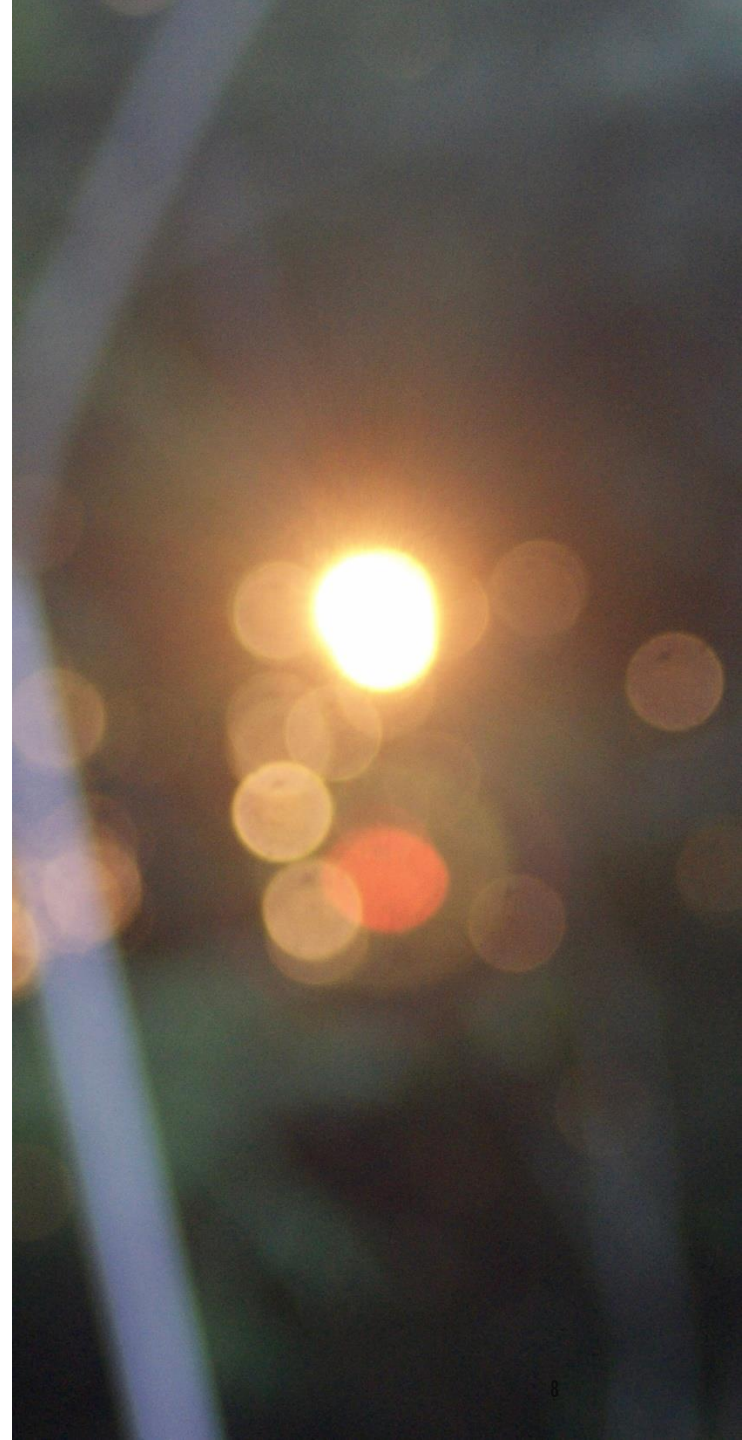=> **Even the BEST PLANS can go AWRY**

CORE LITERATURE THEMES

Literature Review

Theme 2 — Defining public policy/ project success in a changing world

Discuss the complexity of defining and measuring public policy/ project success. Explore the fluidity of perceptions of success, which further complicates policy implementation.

Sub-themes
1. Public policy success
2. Public project success
3. Public policy/ project success: the relationship

Theme 3 — Delivering project benefits in a constantly changing world

Explore the dynamic nature of public project benefits. Discuss how these benefits can change over the course of a project and the challenges this poses for project delivery.

Sub-themes
1. Introduction to project ber realisation management
2. Frameworks for public pro benefits realisation manager
3. Benefits Identification
4. The effectiveness of Cost-Benefit Analysis
5. Post-project benefits realisation management
6. The fluid nature of benefit

Theme 1 — Policy-Project relationship & Policy implementation gap

Understand the concept of public policy implementation and the role of public projects in this process. Explore the issue of the policy implementation gap and discuss how this gap can affect the success of policy implementation.

Sub-themes
1. Public policy
2. Policy formation
3. Accountability issues in the policy process
4. Implementing public policy: Understanding PI and public PM research
5. Ex-post evaluation of public policy/project

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: To what extent do public projects generate the expected policy impacts, and how does the policy implementation gap, characterised by a disparity between intended outcomes and actual impacts, manifest and evolve?

RQ3 recognises the necessity for public projects and policies to adapt to shifting circumstances. It investigates how project planners and practitioners can balance adhering to initial plans and reacting to emergent needs and opportunities

RQ1 lays the groundwork for understanding the role of public projects in realising the intended policy outcomes

RQ3: How is the pre-defined delivery of public projects balanced with the evolving realisation of project benefits in a continuously changing environment?

RQ2: What constitutes public policy and project success, and how does the evolving nature of success impact the central government's ability to implement public policy effectively?

RQ2 builds upon insights derived from RQ1 to delve deeper into the constitution of public policy and project success, offering a better understanding of the driving forces behind the successful realisation of project benefits and policy outcomes

REFLECTION ON YOUR PROJECTS

Did they stay on track, or did they need to adapt?

How did adaptability (or lack of it) affect the outcome?

METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

TWO-STEP APPROACH

1. Literature review, hypothesis formation, and semi-structured interviews with 11 senior UK government experts

=> Insights into policy development & implementation

2. Validate these insights through detailed case studies

The combination of these methods provided a comprehensive view of the implementation process.

CASE STUDIES OVERVIEW

Category	Road Reform Programme (RRP)	Agricultural Reform Programme (ARP)	Note
Objectives	Improve transportation infrastructure.	Transform agriculture and rural environments.	RRP has clearer, more tangible objectives with short-term milestones for easier progress tracking.
	Enhance road network efficiency and reliability.	Promote sustainable, responsible practices.	
Scope	Planning, design, construction, and maintenance of infrastructure.	Policy development, incentives, and technological innovation.	RRP is more focused on infrastructure; ARP is broader and more diverse in scope.
	Traffic and safety improvements.	Engage farmers, landowners, and communities.	
Implementation	Structured, linear process with precise budgeting and scheduling.	Flexible, adaptive approach with stakeholder engagement.	
Outcomes/ benefits	Rigid frameworks and early protection from changes.	Agile, co-designed, and responsive to evolving needs.	
Management approaches	Strict project management and regulatory adherence.	Iterative learning and continuous improvement.	
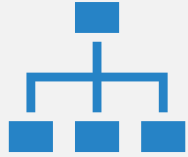
Process ontology:

Views projects as dynamic processes evolving.

Redefines success: Shifts focus from achieving original goals to **embracing adaptability and flexibility**.

Values how well a project responds to changes and challenges.

Paradox theory:

Helps understand and manage contradictions in complex projects.

Balances stability (necessary for implementation) with flexibility (crucial for adaptation).

Contradictions managed well can foster innovation.
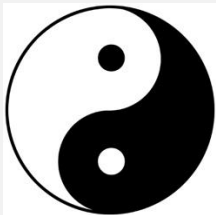
Yin-yang philosophy:

Supports paradox theory with a holistic perspective.

Opposites (e.g., control and adaptability) are complementary forces.

Success in complex projects requires balancing these forces, not eliminating one for the other.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

EVOLUTION OF THE FRAMEWORK

- Initial focus wasn't on paradoxes, but they emerged during expert interviews.

- Paradox theory and yin-yang philosophy were integrated to better explain opposing elements.

- Abductive approach allows for refining the framework during the study.

Paradoxes re public comms

Paradoxes re outcomes and benefits

Paradoxes re policy priorities

Paradoxes re the time factor

Paradoxes re success measurement

Paradoxes re process and guidance
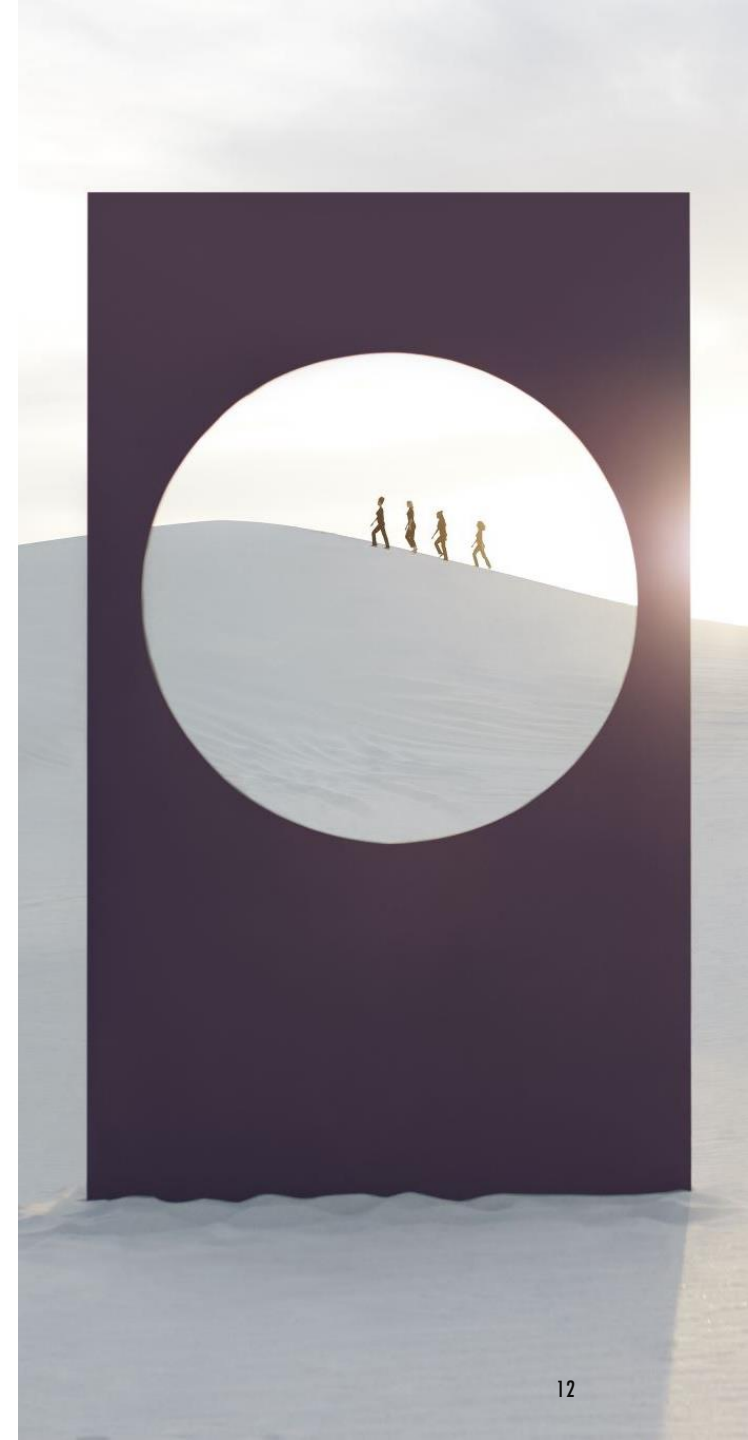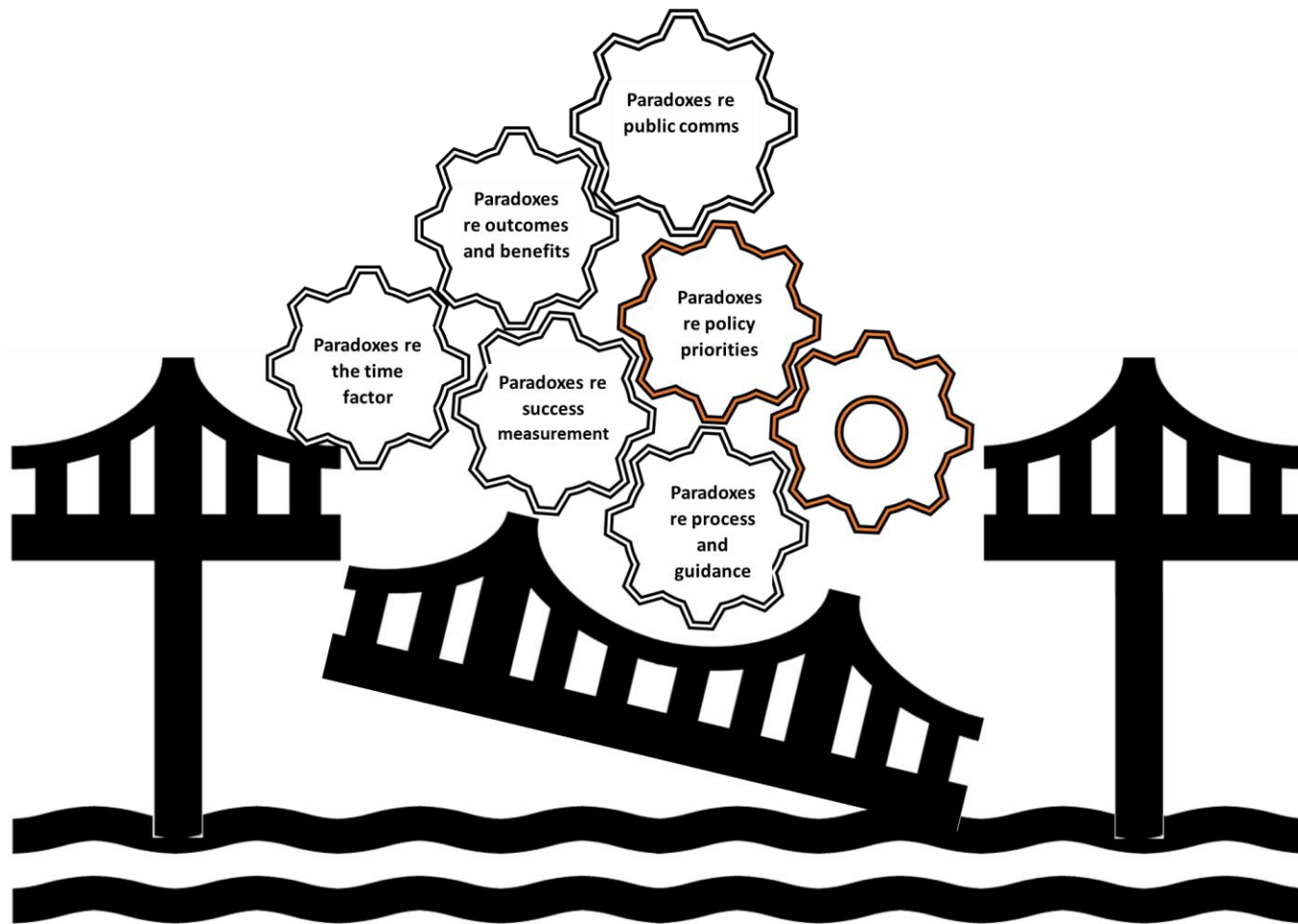
25 paradoxes identified across 7 categories

Complicate the policy implementation process

KEY FINDINGS - PARADOXES

21 PARADOXES AND TENSIONS IDENTIFIED DURING EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Short political horizon vs long policy cycle

Budget allocation: Spend it or lose it

Precision vs accuracy

Tangible vs intangible benefits

Linear policy making vs non-linear policy cycle

Evidence-based policy vs policy-based evidence

Pre-defined goals vs. changing policy environment

Approving policy before agreeing implementation plan

Ambitious ministers vs practical civil servants

Guidelines vs. reality

Ambiguity vs clarity

Project termination vs continuity

Rigid success metrics vs fluid perceptions of success

Conflict Policy Goals

Project success vs policy success

Policy needs vs ministerial priorities

Policy profession vs project profession

Strategic vs innocent misrepresentation

Party Centre Office vs Department Press Office

Bad news vs good news

Media – the culture of addicting to precision

Paradoxes re the Time Factor

Paradoxes re Processes & Guidance

Paradoxes re Success Measurements

Policy Implementation Gap

Paradoxes re Policy Priorities

Paradoxes re Outcomes & Benefits

Paradoxes re Public Comms

Paradoxes	Description
The "Less is More" Paradox	• Identify many benefits during approval to secure funding and support. • Delivery stage: Difficult to monitor all benefits due to resource constraints and complexity.
Policy Simplification vs Policy Effectiveness	• Balancing easy implementation with the need for complexity to achieve goals. • Simple policies are easier but may miss key details. • Complex policies are effective but harder to implement.
The Co-Design Paradox	• Benefits of collaboration in policy design clash with challenges in aligning diverse objectives and preferences during implementation. • Particularly evident in ARP.
Rigidity vs Adaptation	• Tension between flexible policies and the need for stable, predictable implementation. • RRP: Early focus on commitments and protection from changes creates rigidity => Limits adaptability and innovation.

4 ADDITIONAL PARADOXES EMERGED FROM MULTI-CASE RESEARCH

COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES

- Road Reform Programme: Paradoxes more prevalent in early stages => Importance of early intervention.

- Agriculture Reform Programme: Paradoxes persist throughout lifecycle => a need for tailored management during implementation

EXAMPLE 1: LINEAR POLICYMAKING PROCESS VS ITERATIVE POLICY CYCLE

Linear policymaking process vs iterative policy cycle:

- Some government frameworks suggest a clear path, but reality is messy and iterative.
- Benefits are often retrofitted; policies may be politically driven.

Challenges in achieving outcomes:

- Success in delivery doesn't guarantee intended results.
- Conventional models oversimplify, missing necessary adjustments.

EXAMPLE 2: EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY VS. POLICY-BASED EVIDENCE

Evidence-based policy: Decisions informed by thorough analysis.

Policy-based evidence: Shaping evidence to fit pre-decided policies.

UK government supports evidence-based policymaking and discourages selective evidence use.

Quick decision pressures lead to policy-based evidence, often reducing policy effectiveness.

Prioritising evidence-based policymaking is crucial for sound decisions and achieving desired outcomes.

EXAMPLE 3: CONTINUITY VS. TERMINATION PARADOX

Tension between ending a failing project and the pressure to continue it.

Reluctance to cancel projects due to concerns over reputations and financial losses.

Importance of early exit strategies to adapt to evolving situations.
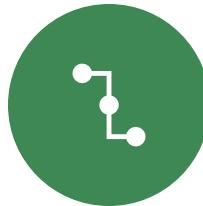
Key challenge: Knowing when to persist or terminate and redirect resources.

CONCEPT OF "SURVIVAL SUCCESS"
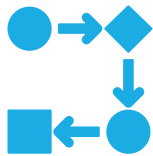
"Survival success" criterion emphasises the importance of adaptability and continuous evolution.

It's about ensuring the project remains relevant and impactful, even as circumstances change.

It reflects the evolving perceptions of success and the need to reframe the legitimacy of projects/policies to preserve their longevity.

Maintain policy implementation continuity

My career, my life, my dream, my ambition, my everything...

Can't stop, too late, sunk cost is huge

It's too big too fail... Will affect too many

My income, my career, my life, my certainty...

Politicians/ Policymaker — Survival Desire — Policy Implementers

Action

Try to attract more supporters or cover up potential/already broken promises

Action

Try to minimise cost/ time overrun

Result

Result

Policy Implementation Gap

= ↑ Breadth of Policy promise + ↓ Scope/quality of Policy Implementation Project

Policy aspiration

Actual policy outcomes

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Survival success as a conceptual framework for understanding the policy implementation gap

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: RETHINKING SUCCESS IN PUBLIC PROJECTS
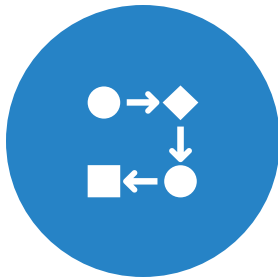
SUCCESS ISN'T JUST ABOUT MEETING PREDEFINED GOALS; IT'S ABOUT ADAPTABILITY AND EVOLUTION.

SHIFT FROM RIGID ADHERENCE TO FLEXIBILITY AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT.

ENSURES PROJECTS ARE SUSTAINABLE AND IMPACTFUL LONG-TERM.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS (CONT)
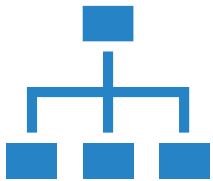
For policymakers

Design policies with built-in flexibility to adjust to changing circumstances, e.g. new information and challenges.

Accept that: the path to achieving goals might need to change as we learn more and as the world around us evolves.

For policy implementers

Navigate the paradoxes inherent in complex projects.

Balance between competing demands and priority: control vs. flexibility, short-term wins vs. long-term sustainability.

=> Projects thrive in an uncertain environment
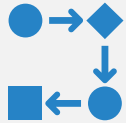
Regular project reviews to assess and adjust strategies as contexts evolve.

Foster a learning culture within teams, sharing insights and improving future performance.

Move beyond traditional success metrics like time and budget. Focus on delivering outcomes that make meaningful impacts.
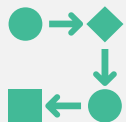
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS (CONT)

Challenges traditional project success metrics.

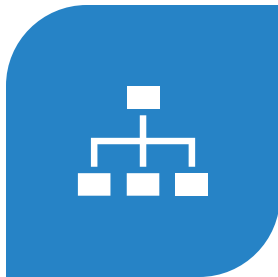Emphasises adaptability and resilience in a rapidly changing world.

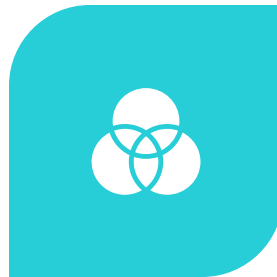Focuses on thriving and delivering value, even when plans no longer fits the reality.

1ST RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION:

INTRODUCTION OF "SURVIVAL SUCCESS"

2ND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION:
IDENTIFICATION OF PARADOXES

PROVIDES A STRUCTURED WAY TO UNDERSTAND INHERENT CHALLENGES IN PUBLIC PROJECTS.

PARADOXES AREN'T JUST PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED, BUT ONGOING TENSIONS TO BE MANAGED

HELPS PROJECT MANAGERS DEVELOP REALISTIC AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES.

Integrate insights from multiple disciplines.

Enrich our understanding of public project management with holistic perspectives that acknowledge the complexities and nuances of the real world.

Offer new tools and approaches for managing complexities in various contexts.

3ᴿᴰ RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION:

INTERDISCIPLINARY INSIGHTS

CONCLUSION

Implementing public policy through projects is inherently complex.

Success isn't just about ticking boxes or following a set plan or meeting predefined goals

Key to success: Flexibility, adaptability, and continuous evolution to meet the ever-shifting needs of society

Bridge the policy implementation gap to ensure that policymakers' efforts are translated into meaningful benefits amid uncertain environment

Rethinking how we manage public projects

Valuing adaptability as much as stability

=> Public policies become better aligned with the complex realities of our world.

CALL TO ACTION

How can we build in more flexibility?

How can we better anticipate and manage the paradoxes that unavoidably arise?

How can we ensure that the projects we lead today will stand the test of time and deliver the benefits our societies need tomorrow

QUESTIONS &
ANSWERS