

PERSPECTIVES ON GOVERNANCE NETWORKS RESEARCH ORIENTATIONS FOR ASSESSING COLLABORATIVE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Jack W. Meek

Abstract

This article offers three kinds of perspectives – or research orientations – for governance networks: a systems perspective, a participant perspective and a functional perspective. Each perspective draws upon different kinds of assumptions (and units of analysis) for analysis – system benefits, individual benefits, network performance - in regard to the assessment of governance networks. The paper illustrates each of the approaches and concludes that all three perspectives can contribute to understanding and improving governance network contributions.

Keywords: governance – networks – systems theory – network performance

PERSPECTIVES ON GOVERNANCE NETWORKS RESEARCH ORIENTATIONS FOR ASSESSING COLLABORATIVE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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◆ INTRODUCTION

The administration of public policy often relies on a network of stakeholders interacting and working collaboratively to implement public policy (Koliba, Meek and Zia 2011).

The assessment of governance network performance is a challenge because of the diversity of stakeholders as well as the nature of complex - sometimes persistent - problems we now face in our communities. How can we assess performance when problems persist?

Persistent, complex societal issues include balancing energy use with environmental sustainability, managing new transportation infrastructures with growing demands, providing clean and reliable water to expanding urban populations, providing adequate healthcare at reasonable prices for all citizens are some of the many public policy challenges our urban centers face. To address these complex societal issues, governments are forming new alliances and partnerships that seek to implement policy

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choices. As new kinds of governance arrangements are created, we need a way to assess the performance of these new inventions.

This article offers three kinds of perspectives – or research orientations – to assess governance networks: a systems perspective, a participant perspective and a functional perspective. Each perspective draws upon different kinds of assumptions with regard to the assessment of governance networks:

1. The system perspective advances the high regard for researching governance networks as performing within a larger social or metropolitan system and where concerns are focused on system contributions, system integration and system learning.
2. The participant perspective draws upon individual and organizational experiences and rewards as participant in a governance network. This perspective emphasizes individual participant benefits that are derived from network participation.
3. The functional perspective emphasizes actual products of governance networks, such as formal agreements, that are produced that are a result of stakeholder collaboration in governance networks.

These three perspectives – system contribution, participant perception of experience, networks functional outcomes - are each important in interpreting governance network performance: Does the network contribute to the outcomes that improves the overall system? Do individuals in the network benefit from participation? Is there a functional outcome that is produced by the network?

Network participation (Agranoff and McGuire 2003) Fiock, Lee and Park 2012) and network performance are fundamental concerns in public administration research (Koliba, Meek and Zia 2011; Koliba 2014). This paper seeks to offer three perspectives that places these approaches in combination to as to ascertain different nuances of the performance of governance networks.

Of course, there are additional dimensions of governance network performance that are important to examine. Is the governance network sustainable Cooper, Bryer and Meek 2011)? Is the governance network accountable (Sorensen 2014)? Addressing these questions are also important concerns for practitioners and researchers in public administration. These concerns are related to the central focus of this paper: assessing the performance of the governance network.

◆ EMERGENCE OF GOVERNANCE

General technological, sociological and other environmental dynamics have significant momentum and are driving public officials of contemporary organizations to design a variety of administrative strategies in response to complex challenges. These administrative responses include developing new kinds of organizational design and partnering with other agencies, even co-producing public services with citizens. In this environment, organizational adaptation, partnering and learning receive much attention. What we are witnessing in our public organizations is the emergence of new forms of governance. These new forms are still representative of traditional institutions, but they also include new dimensions, particularly the partnering with other agencies, the development of public - private partnerships or joint partnership with non-profit entities, and the embracing of civic engagement and participation in the co-production of public services. These new forms of governance are often referred to as collaborative governance networks.

In designing and implementing public service arrangements, three general forms of “governance” organizational opportunities can be identified: hierarchies, markets and networks (Powell 1990). Hierarchies have a long history of implementation and are well known. Markets (or the various forms of government contracting) have had enormous attention throughout the world over the recent decades. Networks have emerged in a variety of forms and we are only beginning to develop systematic research about their behavior.

As we examine organizational alternatives in public service design and implementation, each can be differentiated as to its distinct features. Doing so will improve our understanding of the benefits of each organizational opportunity. Table 1, below, Brown (1990) outlines the key features of three kinds of organizational opportunities.

Table 1
Governance organizational opportunities.

	Hierarchy	Markets	Networks
Normative Basis	Routines	Prices	Complementary Strengths
Means of Communication	Routines	Prices	Relational
Methods of Conflict Resolution	Administrative Fiat - Supervision	Haggling – resource to courts for enforcement	Norm of reciprocity – reputational concerns
Degree of Flexibility	Low	High	Medium
Amount of Commitment Among Parties	Medium to High	Low	Medium to High
Tone or Climate	Formal, Bureaucratic	Precision and/or Suspicion	Open-ended, mutual benefits
Actor Preferences or Choices	Dependent	Independent	Interdependent

Source: Powell (1990).

The emerging forms of governance we identified earlier in this paper are governance networks and – given the unique organization features outlined above - will likely call upon different requirements for public leadership and management (Agranoff 2012). These new and emerging skills will be critical in the facilitation of governance networks.

➤ Defining Networks

Goldsmith and Eggers' (2004) define and usage of the term “network” is in reference to initiatives deliberately undertaken by government to accomplish public goals, with measurable performance goals, assigned responsibilities to each partner, and structured information flow.

The rise of governance networks has inspired various definitions to serve as guidance in the understanding of these new forms of governance. For our purposes, the term “network” is an overarching term that reflects various kinds of alliances, collaborative relationships, partnerships and coalitions. Below are alternative definitions of the term network in public administration research:

O'Toole (1997)

“Networks are *structures of interdependence involving multiple organizations or parts thereof, where one unit is not merely the formal*

subordinate of the others in some larger hierarchical arrangement. Networks exhibit some structural stability but extend beyond formally established linkages and policy-legitimated ties.... The institutional glue congealing networked ties may include authority bond, exchange relations, and coalitions based on common interest, all within a single multi-unit structure."

McGuire (2003)

Networks are "*structures involving multiple nodes—agencies and organizations—with multiple linkages*. A public management network thus includes agencies involved in a public policy making and administrative structure through which public good and services are planned, designed, produced, and delivered (and any or all of the activities). Such network structures can be formal or informal, and they are typically intersectoral, intergovernmental, and based functionally in a specific policy or policy area. That is, officials from government organizations and agencies at federal, state, and local levels operate in structures of exchange and production with representatives from profit making and not for profit organizations."

Agranoff (2004)

"...[N]etworks of public organizations ... [involve] formal and informal structures, composed of representatives from governmental and nongovernmental agencies working interdependently to exchange information and/or jointly formulate and implement policies that are usually designed for action through their respective organizations."

Keast, Mandell, Brown & Woolcock (2004 p. 364)

"Networks occur when links among a number of organizations or individuals become formalized".

McGuire, M. (2002 p. 600)

"First, the term "network" is used in this article to describe public policy making and administrative structures involving multiple nodes (agencies and organizations) with multiple linkages . . . I do not define networks as purely sociological phenomena. Instead, I use the network as a metaphor to describe joint situations in which more than one organization is dependent on another to perform a task".

➤ **Kinds of Networks**

In addition to the formal arrangements of governments, many different varieties of networks (governmental, quasi-governmental, private, non-profit and volunteer) are forming and responding to various urban pressures and there is evidence to indicate they play an increasingly vital role in the design and implementation of public policy (Flinders and Smith 1999). From the work of Powel (2002) we note that networks may be formal, informal, permanent or ad hoc multi-organizational (public, private, or non-profit) initiatives. These initiatives are deliberately undertaken where one organization is not merely the formal subordinate of another in a hierarchical arrangement and

where more than one organization is dependent on another to perform a task(s) to achieve mutually agreed upon goals through information and resource sharing that otherwise could not be accomplished independently.

From the research of Goldsmith and Eggers (2004), Koliba, et al (2011), we can summarize three different types of collaboration (networks) in the following categories:

- ❖ Third party government (non-profits and partnerships)
- ❖ Joined-up government (homeland security)
- ❖ Digital government (DMV website)
- ❖ Governance of citizen's choices (collaborative learning)

➤ **Why Networks**

As indicated earlier, governance networks have been formed to address complex issues that confront our society (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016). The reason for network governance to emerge in the public sector is due to its advantages of value sharing, cost reduction, and flexibility (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004). As a result of technology breakthroughs and increased community awareness, governments are seeking to improve its services and collaborate with other organizations to meet the public demands.

Additional reasoning for the emergence of governance networks are summarized below:

- ❖ Benefits gained through social exchange (Blau 1964)
- ❖ Sum of the parts can do more than the parts on their own (April, Macdonald & Vriesendorp)
- ❖ Joint service delivery because of resources scarcity
- ❖ Efficiency
- ❖ Economy of Scale (more service is produced with minimal effort)
- ❖ Response to the disarticulated state (Frederickson 1999)
- ❖ Political will or mandates: government grants designed that demand collaboration among agencies

In the work of Eggers and Goldsmith (2004), the advantages of networks in comparison to bureaucracy are emphasized. These benefits include specialization, innovation, speed and flexibility, Eggers and Goldsmith (2004).

◆ THREE PERSPECTIVES OF GOVERNANCE NETWORKS

In the work by Provan and Milward (2001) “Do Networks Really Work? A Framework for Evaluating Public-Sector Organizational Networks,” the authors challenge the assumption that networks are preferred forms of governance and argue that the literature on networks has failed to ask whether or not networks are really effective. The authors point out that the assumption that networks are automatically better has taken the focus away from their actual effectiveness.

To assist in the assessment of the value of governance networks raised by Provan and Milward (2001), this paper offers three perspectives to address the challenge of assessing networks: systems perspective, a participant perspective and a functional perspective.

Each perspective offers a different kind of framework from which we can assess governance networks.

➤ 1 – The Systems Perspective: Do Networks Make a Difference

We can examine networks through systems theory on at least two dimensions: system wide influence and adaptation (Baumgartner and Jones 199) through adaptation (Meek 2008).

System wide - In assessing network effectiveness, one approach is to place the network within the larger system with which it interacts and to address interactive effects of network impact from a system wide perspective.

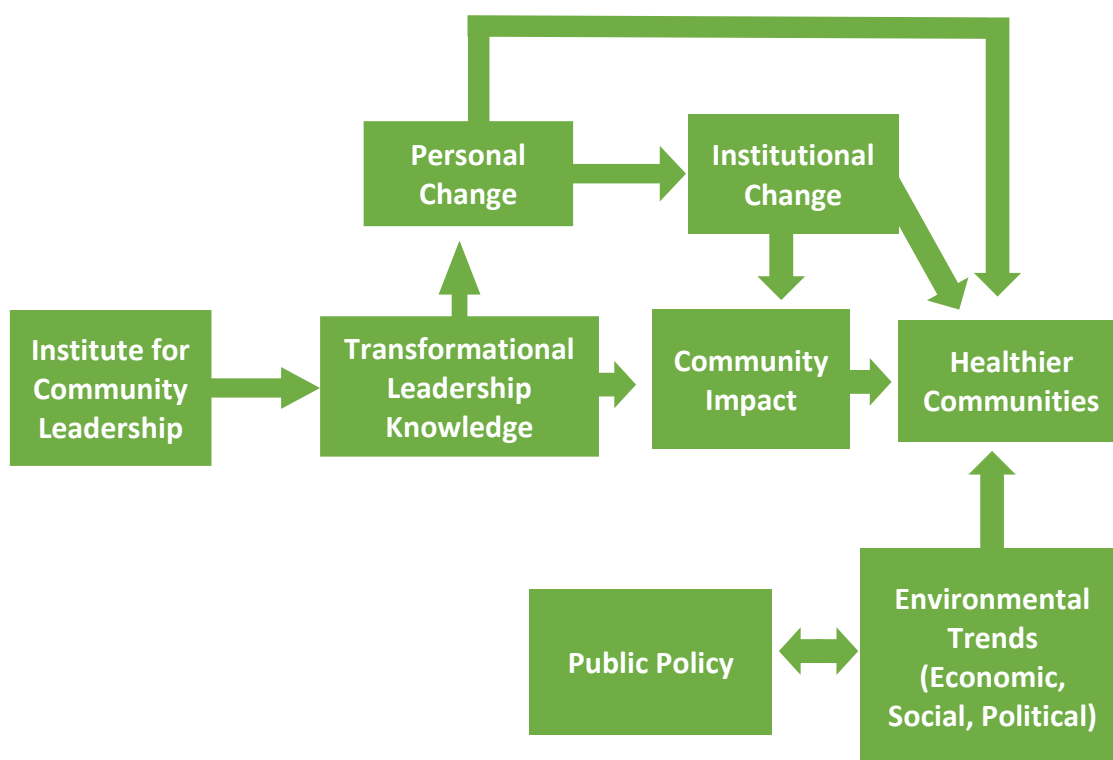
As an example, the Institute for Community Leadership was developed with the mission to achieve “healthier communities” by enhancing local leadership within a community. The Institute was a creation of local health agency leadership in Southern California seeking ways to deepen community health outcomes through the development of the leadership capacity in communities. To achieve this goal, a leadership academy was established designed for local leaders. We can visualize (see Figure 1 below) the many relationships of the institute system-wide by mapping of the intended influences envisioned to create healthier communities.

The model assists in discussing the possibilities of the institute. Most significant is to discuss the impact on the community that is intended by leadership

capacity development of institute members. The model outlines the linkages in the system that illustrates the impact of the institute on the community in order to achieve the outcome of “healthier communities.” The latter is seen also as a function of many additional societal trends along with institute energies and influences. In addition, the model stipulates a distinction between individual and institutional changes that are also of concern to the mission of the institute. Combined, the multi-faceted dimensions of the Institute add to the complexity of our environment. (Meek 2001).

Figure 1

Extended model of relationships: Institute for community leadership.



With the above mapping from a system perspective (Figure 1), we can begin to assess the impact of the governance network – a citizen initiative (governance of citizen choices) – on intended performance outcomes, in this case, healthier communities. Note that the impact is influenced also by other factors outside the control of the Institute for Community Leadership.

Adaptation Thorough Learning—As second area dimension of the systems perspective is the influence of governance networks in building associations and connections. As a network emerges within the system and interacts with its

environment, system adaptation may be evident through learning among stakeholders that are a result of the Institute for Community Leadership. In this case, learning emerges when:

- ❖ Independent actors seeking new partnerships and relationships through self- organization: With Multiple actors within the system--Inputs to Throughputs to Outputs—Becomes Complex (Meek 2008);
- ❖ These self-organizing efforts resemble “complex adaptive systems” (CAS) where agents seek to develop meaning through associations at the local level, quite unaware of larger effects of their association at a larger systematic level (indeterminate system behavior).

The key feature of performance of the institute is how other stakeholders of the system respond and interact (feedback in systems terms) to the Leadership Institute members and initiatives. The institute stimulates a kind of system-wide feedback that offers learning opportunities through interaction. This learning is a form of system adaptation, in this case, adaptation in the achievement of healthier communities (Meek 2008).

➤ **2 – The Participant Perspective: Involvement, Rewards and Learning**

A second kind of assessment of governance networks in from the perspective of the participant. Based on the 10-year research effort of public administration officials that were students at the University of La Verne, California (Meek 1997a and 2007), participant involvement in networks has offered insight into the value of networks and network involvement.

Based surveys of public administration officials, the assessment of involvement in governance networks included how much time participants spent in networks. The results were as follows:

Individual Network Involvement

- ❖ 33% prepare weekly for the network
- ❖ 55% spend more than 10% of their time in the network
- ❖ 55% spend more than 10% of their resources on the network
- ❖ 11% reported having high personal influence in the network

Network participants were also asked what the value of network participation was for them in their roles at their organization or agency. The results were as follows:

Network Value to the Individual

- ❖ 67% reported that network involvement neither increases or decreases their responsibility in the organization
- ❖ 33% reported that they attributed 40% or more of their individual success to network involvement

Finally, network participants were asked if network participation was of value to their organization. The results were as follows:

Network Value to Organization

- ❖ 56% are representing their organization
- ❖ 83% of individuals' involvement in the network meshes with organizations' goals
- ❖ 44% report that the quality of organizational service delivery depends directly on network involvement

Assessment of participant involvement is one way of assessment the performance of the governance network. In this assessment of public administration officials involved in networks in general, respondents indicated that network involvement:

4. Took time (10-33% of their time),
5. Was a value to the individual (increasing individual responsibility and success);
6. Was of value to the organization.

Other assessments from these respondents indicated that the quality of the service jointly provided in the network was dependent on networking.

This kind of assessment offers insight into the value of networks from the individual perspective and should be added to the performance assessment of governance networks.

➤ 3 – The Functional Perspective: Developing Agreements Through Collaborative Learning Model of Collaborative Planning

The third perspective of assessment of governance networks would be from the functional perspective. This perspective highlights whether the network produces a tangible outcome that is functional for stakeholders.

To assess this perspective, it is useful to report on the *Collaborative Learning Project* undertaken at the University of Southern California. In this project, neighborhood council members - drawn from various neighborhood districts that formed in the City of Los Angeles – volunteered to work with city department administrative leaders in order enhance civic- administrative relationships. This initiative established a new kind of governance partnership through collaborative learning.

The project relied on action research (Kathi, Cooper and Meek 2007) proposed to examine how Los Angeles City administrative agencies support and include the newly established system of neighborhood councils in the production and delivery of city services. The purposes of the study were to:

- ❖ Identify and report on the administrative barriers to effective service delivery to neighborhoods and offer recommendations to support further efforts at bureaucratic reform;
- ❖ Convene a series of collaborative learning and design forums that bring selected city administrators and neighborhood council leadership together to develop new structures, terms, and practices for partnering in the production of city services;
- ❖ Assist participating city administrators and neighborhoods councils in developing an actionable work plan to address a local issue using the new collaborative processes and practices developed during the learning and design forums;
- ❖ Establish working relationships between participating councils and administrators in which citizens and administrators are involved in ongoing communication and collaborative decision-making toward shared goals (Kathi, Cooper and Meek 2007).

The design of the project was to draw upon action research to inform participants on processes that would lead to a mutual agreement – a tangible,

functional outcome – that would result from this new kind of governance network engagement.

The result of the Collaborative Learning Project was the establishment of an MOU among stakeholders that guided the delivery of departmental services to the neighborhood in the coming year. (Cooper, Bryer and Meek 2008). The results of this service would be annually reviewed and the stakeholders would the revisit jointly the designed objectives and performance for the year.

The case of Neighborhood Leadership building relationships with large bureaucratic governmental enterprises is a remarkable example of how governance networks can be localized and meaningful. This new kind of connection with government can offer meaningful outcomes to all stakeholders.

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◆ SUMMARY

The rise of governance networks to address complex problems has raised important questions in regard to how we address governance performance. This paper offers three perspectives that are valuable in the assessment of governance network performance.

The first perspective, the system perspective, sought to frame the governance initiative within the broader system and identifying how the initiative interacted with other parts of the system. In the case of the Southern California Leadership Institute, system wide connections were identified as well as stakeholder adaptation to leadership initiatives.

In the second perspective, the individual perspective, individual benefits of governance network involvement were identified by local public officials. Findings indicate that network involvement takes effort (time) and that network members received responsibility and performance benefits.

The third perspective, the functional perspective, assesses the benefit of achieving a tangible outcome – in this case a memorandum of understanding developed among citizens and department agencies. Through a collaborative leaning process, stakeholders were able to design and implement a tangible outcome in a newly formed governance network that embraced citizens in a significant way. Table 2 below, summarizes the three different perspectives and their contributions to assessing governance networks.

Table 2
Three perspectives to assess collaborative governance networks.

Research Perspective	Assessment Contribution	Application
System	Ascertain network value within a broader system it operates	Does the system benefit (through stakeholder interaction and learning) from the governance network
Participant	Determine participant value in network engagement	Individual and agency (as a stakeholder) assessment of value of network participation
Functional	Determine tangible benefits of governance network for stakeholders	Agency (or stakeholder) assessment of performance of network

In summary, these three perspectives offer unique and differentiated ways to assess governance networks. Combined, these perspectives offer insight into the value of governance networks as they become more embedded in our society.

This paper has sought to illustrate each of the approaches and their value in assessing governance networks. The value of each of the three perspectives contribute to understanding and improving governance network contributions. As a result of these differentiated values, it is important the we assess governance networks from different lenses as each offers unique insight for assessing and improving governance networks. We need to move beyond single dimension assessment research designs and embrace multiple (and combined) research designs so as to improve our understanding of governance networks.

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