

Chapter 30

From Network Governance to Metagovernance

Ralf Müller

Published as:

Müller, R. (2023). From Network Governance to Metagovernance. In R. Müller, S. Sankaran, & N. Drouin (Eds.), *Research Handbook on the Governance of Projects*. Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.

Abstract

Inter-organizational networks have become the de-facto organization structure for the delivery of large projects. This chapter describes a three-layered framework for the governance of these networks, from the investor, via intermediate governance levels to the individual network for the delivery of a project. At its lowest level, the framework describes the governance of an inter-organizational network for the delivery of a project (i.e., network governance). Then it describes this network as one in a network of various networks each executing organization is involved. This network of networks requires governance (i.e.; governance of networks). These two governance layers rest on a set of ground rules imposed by the investor or government (i.e., metagovernance). The chapter describes the three-layered framework and elements, their interaction, and their impact on project performance. It ends with a theory on the framework's functioning.

Keywords: metagovernance, governance of networks, network governance, multi-level governance, inter-organizational networks

Introduction

Inter-organizational networks are popular for the delivery of large projects (Steen, DeFillippi, Sydow, Pryke, & Michelfelder, 2018). Here partnering organizations collaborate temporarily

as more or less independent actors in a network to jointly deliver a project. The governance of such a single network is known as ‘network governance’. Organizations engage in these networks to reap benefits that they could not achieve when doing the project on their own. However, the organizations in such a network for a project are engaged in several other projects in parallel. These can be customer-delivery projects but also projects for training, certification, in-house improvements etc. Hence, the organizations are part of a network of networks, which requires governance above the level of the individual network. Along with (Müller et al., 2022) we call this ‘governance of networks’ (GoN), which is defined as the governance of several networks over time or simultaneously.

Nevertheless, even GoN does not work autonomously and must respect the ground rules set by the investor or government. This is typically known as ‘third-order governance’ or metagovernance, as it is called here. The present chapter describes a framework that integrates these three governance layers (network governance, GoN, and metagovernance) for a seamless chain of governance from the investor to the individual project.

The chapter continues by describing this framework, followed by a discussion of the nature of the governance approaches exercised by metagovernance. The two subsequent parts report on the quantitative assessment of the relationships between the governance layers and the impact of governance layers on project performance, respectively. The chapter ends with a conclusion, which outlines the theory behind the framework.

A framework for the governance of inter-organizational networks for projects

This section describes a three-layered framework for the governance of inter-organizational networks for projects as developed by (Müller et al., 2022). The framework with its layers and their constituting elements is shown in Figure 30-1.

Network governance

Large and megaprojects are typically executed through a network of contributing and collaborating organizations, such as prime and subcontractors, Special Purpose Entities (SPE), advisors and consultants, etc. (Denicol, Davies, & Pryke, 2021; Sainati, Brookes, & Locatelli, 2017a). These networks require management, which, in turn, requires governance as a framework for management’s work and accountabilities. The governance of such a network for one particular project is referred to as network governance (see also Chapter 29). The multi-level nature of these networks is described in Chapter 6, which introduces Type I governance and Type II governance as a framework to understand multi-level governance.

Type I governance comprises the hierarchical part of the network, from the investor down to the prime contractor and the subordinated tiers of hierarchically organized contractors. Organizations in this part of the network aim for little overlap in their accountabilities and responsibilities to avoid clashes in decisions and working methods. At the same time, decisions are made from a project-wide perspective, keeping in mind the overall objectives and constraints of the project. This type of governance is in stark contrast to Type II governance, which comprises the many contractors and sub-contractors organized in an informal network to implement the project through the delivery of products and services. They take a task perspective in their decisions and work methods. They are deliberately chosen for their overlap in skills and areas of specialization to substitute each other in case of skills or human resources needs, such as in solving unexpected problems. This task orientation in Type II governance provides for redundancy in skills and resilience in project execution (Unterhitzberger et al., 2022) .

The division of the inter-organizational network topology in its hierarchical (Type I) and its networked (Type II) sub-topologies raises the question how these two very different topologies interact with each other. This is accomplished through three different organizational units, functioning as interface organizations between the two topologies. Chapter 6 describes them in detail. They are called clubs, agencies, and boards and briefly explained here:

- *Clubs* are ad-hoc collaborations of individuals from different organizations to solve a sudden problem, such as technology not working or the installation of unplanned equipment. They collaborate based on mutual trust to solve an issue informally.
- *Agencies* are organizational units to govern the link between the organizations under Type I and Type II governance. They are typically headed by a representative of a Type I governance organization, such as the prime contractor, and staffed with experts from supplier organizations under Type II governance. Agencies are formally set up with defined roles and regular meetings to address concerns for both Type I and II governance organizations.
- *Boards* are the most formal institutions, often set up before or at the start of the project and potentially lasting until project completion. Boards are typically accountable to major stakeholders, such as the investor, the public, or the government, for correctness in project execution. Their perspective and scope of decisions can

reach beyond the project objectives and include the concerns of project contexts and stakeholders.

The above-described Type I and II governance and their interface organizations (clubs, agencies, and boards) constitute the elements of network governance as described by (Hooghe & Marks, 2001) in political science and empirically tested by (Müller et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022) in the realm of projects. This network governance is depicted in Figure 30-1 as the lowest layer in the three-layered framework for the governance of inter-organizational networks for projects. Practical examples of this layer in different projects are described in Chapter 6.

Governance of networks

The inter-organizational network for a project does not exist in isolation. Each of the companies in this network is simultaneously part of several networks, some for delivering projects at different stages, with some projects at the planning stage, while others are in the execution or close-down stages. Other networks such a company belongs to may serve different purposes. These can include networks for training and certification of their employees to remain competitive or meet qualification criteria during project bidding. Other networks are perhaps formed with companies for joint tendering for new projects. Yet other networks are perhaps concerned with developing, improving, or tailoring products or services to master future requirements. From this perspective, the individual organization is part of a network of networks. Just as any other network, this network of networks requires governance. This governance is known as Governance of Networks (GoN) (Müller et al., 2022).

GoN aims to reduce the friction between the networks by defining the ways participating networks are formed and structured, the accountabilities and responsibilities of the individual member networks, and the different modes the networks collaborate. These are known as the elements of GoN. The five governance elements of this governance layer are described next. *Structuring* addresses the timing of and the different ways new or changing networks are internally organized. For example, a training network to educate organizations on the latest developments in Building Information Systems (BIM) in the construction industry is typically formed in-between the delivery of specific projects when the member organizations are not busy with delivering their products and services. The nature of this network as a learning network lends itself to a star-like structure, with a teaching organization in the center, star-like connected with the satellite learning organizations. This structure is different in

project tendering networks or project execution networks, whose timing is set by the investor. Here potential bidders enter complex mixtures of hierarchical, star-like, and networked structures intending to jointly arrange their capabilities to deliver the expected project outputs best. The structuring of networks is often linked to developing a network narrative, which provides individuals inside and outside of the network with a sense of purpose and legitimacy of the network, its scope, and objectives.

Formation addresses the governance of the ways network partners are identified and selected. Approaches to formation fall on a continuum from orchestrated to emergent, with hybrid versions in-between.

Orchestrated network formation follows a predetermined deliberate evaluation and selection process, typically imposed by the investor or government. They are predominantly found in public procurement processes, which, when strictly followed, should provide for transparency in execution and fair treatment of the applicants. Orchestrated forms of formation tend to create more hierarchical networks, with decision authority resting clearly in the hierarchy of the network. These networks are led by the top of the hierarchy, for example, by the investor, prime contractor, or a Special Purpose Entity (SPE) (Sainati, Brookes, & Locatelli, 2017b). Hence, orchestrated networks tend to be dominated by Type I governance organizations. Emergent network formation does not apply the same level of process compliance. It can include selecting network partners based on prior experiences in working together, ‘knowing someone who knows someone’, or random contacts at conferences or other events. The selection of partners typically stems from mutual trust in each others’ capabilities and the efficacy in jointly delivering the network’s intended output. Emerging networks typically show a broader power distribution than orchestrated networks, with more democratic relationships in predominantly networked structures. Hence, a dominance of Type II governance organizations.

Accountabilities address the transparent definition of governance and management institutions in the network, and their roles, rights, answerabilities, and related escalation procedures. Accountability is one of the four principles of good governance described in Chapter 2. It includes the assignment of priorities among networks (e.g., project execution networks have higher priority than training networks) and their leading organizations at any point in time, as well as the definition of the different networks’ accountabilities toward different stakeholder groups. With that comes the obligation to communicate the network members' defined accountabilities and follow up on their implementation.

Responsibilities address the application of socially accepted working standards among the network members. Responsibility is also one of the four principles of good governance described in Chapter 2. Thus, it addresses the governance of professionalism in task execution (such as in professional, administrative, management, and governance tasks). This includes the definition of particular socially accepted working standards to be followed by the network members (such as ISO 21 505 for project governance), the encouragement for and provision of training in these standards, as well as the definition and follow-up on criteria for the pursuance of professionalism (such as professional certification).

Modes of collaboration address the establishment, maintenance, and governance of interfaces between the different networks for smooth collaboration in the network of networks. Related examples include the careful setup of a digital infrastructure for construction projects (e.g., using BIM) through a collaborative effort between the project execution network and the education network.

The different implementations of each of the five elements of GoN, as described above, allow for a variety of different GoN governance patterns. Moreover, GoN's position in the framework between Metagovernance and Network Governance requires flexibility to adjust to the particularities of each of the two adjacent layers. A strong and authoritative Metagovernance might not leave much decision power at the GoN level in the ways networks are formed and structured and the accountabilities and responsibilities assigned to them. Contrarily, the idiosyncrasies at the network governance layer may demand more democratic structures and relationships among the networks as allowed for by Metagovernance. Here GoN must be carefully designed and adjusted to the constantly changing circumstances at the project level to optimize governance for the best of the project. Through that GoN becomes a potential buffer between the authoritative demands from Metagovernance and the demands for informality, democracy, and flexibility required for the necessary resilience at the network governance layer.

Metagovernance

GoN and network governance rest on several ground rules for setting up governance structures and their interaction to synchronize and coordinate activities across layers. These are typically issued by the investor and/or the government with the aim of avoiding governance failure. This “governance of governance” is often referred to as metagovernance (Torfing, 2016, p. 525-256).

Metagovernance is defined as “the art of governing more or less self-regulating governance arenas that are producing concrete acts of governance” (Torfing, 2016.p. 526) by providing a “governance order where values, norms, and principles are advanced according to which governance practices can be formed and evaluated” (Kooiman & Jentoft, 2009. p. 832).

For that, Metagovernance defines the limitations within which the governed lower layers and their organizations can execute their governance function without undermining the governed layers’ self-regulation too much. Therefore, the limitations are set with the objective to allow the governed layers the appropriate amount of self-governance possible without risking governance failure. Hence, the extent governed layers can define their own agenda, objectives, and norms and negotiate the content of projects and their deliverables without endangering the governed project(s) and organizations’ goal accomplishment. Another objective is to set the limitations for the governed layers in a way that allows maximizing foreseen benefits through their projects.

Through Metagovernance, the investor decides on the level of autocracy versus democracy that pervades the different governance layers in an attempt to ensure successful project delivery at the lowest level of risk for governance failure. Jessop (2015) traces these failures back to:

- Oversimplification of the conditions for tasks and actions, as well as insufficient knowledge about the factors impacting governance objectives
- Coordination problems within and between the various layers, such as between people, organizations, and networks
- Coordination problems caused by the inconsistent definition of governance objects, different time and space horizons, interests, and power levels of actors

The Metagovernance framework by Jessop (2015) counteracts these deficiencies and provides for a structure to organize Metagovernance through four reflexive modes of governance, steered by a fifth one. The term “reflexive” indicates the need for careful, context contingent weighing of alternatives in decision-making. These modes are:

1. *Meta-exchange* – the reflexive decision on the markets or sub-markets to invest in. In the world of projects, this is the investor or government’s decision to invest in a particular asset or create particular markets, such as in self-driving cars instead of new buildings. It provides the governed entities with the values and principles regarding the investor’s investment preferences

2. *Meta-organization* – the reflexive decision on the types and numbers of organizations and organizational ecologies allowed for the investment. In a project context, this includes decisions on national versus international bidders and network partners or the minimum size of participating organizations. It also includes decisions on the use of Special Purpose Entities (SPE), which are temporarily established firms during the course of a project to fulfill specific tasks, such as financial oversight (Sainati et al., 2017b). It provides the governed entities with the norms and principles regarding participating organizations
3. *Meta-heterarchy* – the reflexive design of the settings and conditions for self-organization by the governed entities. It shows the investor's preferences for network formation (e.g., orchestrated, emergent, or hybrid), network structure (e.g., more hierarchical or more democratic), and topologies. As such, it provides the governed entities with the values and principles for establishing and maintaining their networks
4. *Meta-solidarity* – the provision of opportunities for actors to collaborate with the aim of building social capital. In the realm of projects, this refers to holding knowledge-sharing meetings or bidder meetings to allow the potential network partners to meet and discuss possible collaborations.
5. *Modification of the balance of the four modes* – this steers the emphasis on each of the four modes in situational contingency. In project settings, this may include more emphasis on meta-exchange and meta-organization in the early phases of new investments, such as in the feasibility and conceptual stages, versus greater emphasis on meta-heterarchy and meta-solidarity in later project stages, when the project organization needs to be adjusted to the issues and unplanned problems emerging during project implementation.

The five metagovernance modes were empirically tested and validated in the realm of projects (Müller et al., 2022; Unterhitzenberger, 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

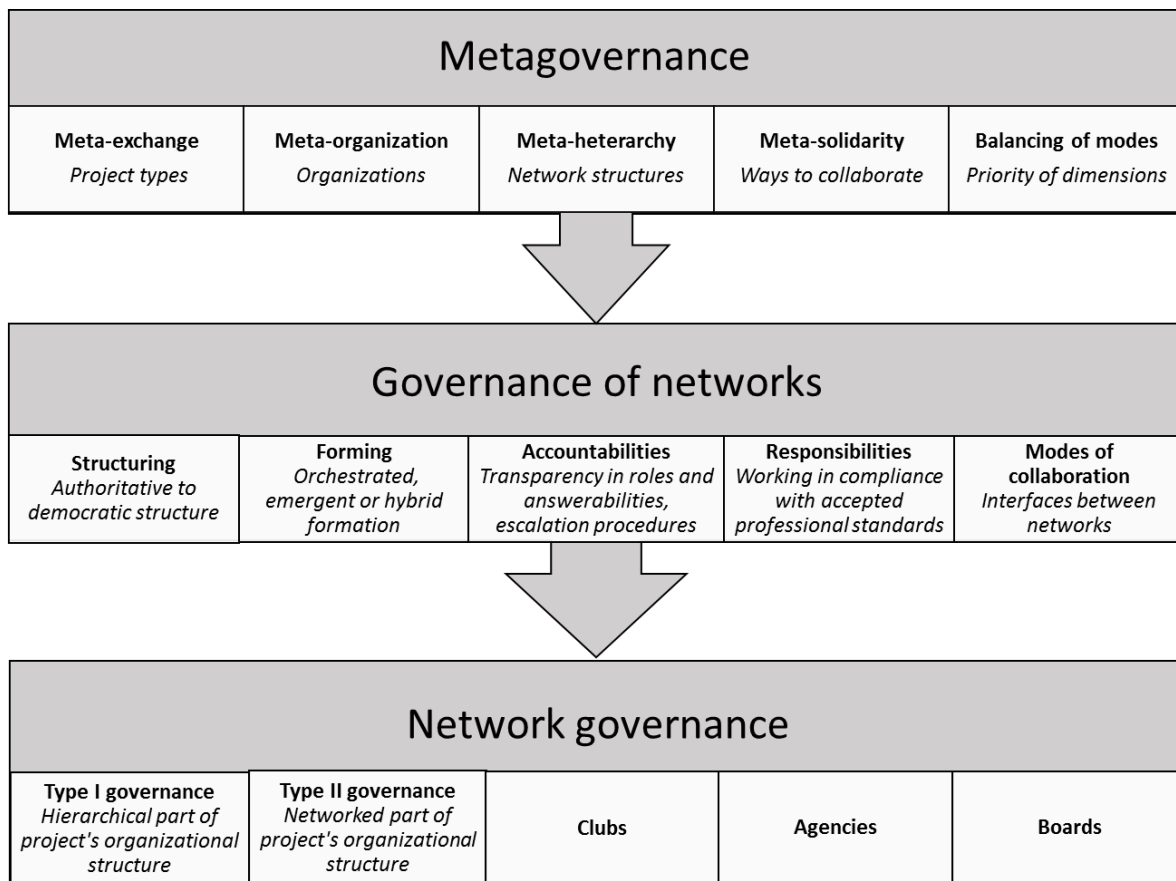


Figure 30-1: Governance framework of inter-organizational networks for projects (after Müller et al., 2022)

The above discussion of network layers raises questions like “Who (which institutions) executes GoN and network governance?”

In their classic work on network governance modes, Provan and Kenis (2008) distinguished three different modes of concentrating governance authority in a network. These are:

- *Network lead organization*: one organization from within the network executes governance. The organization’s mandate may stem from its powerful position, from the agreement by the networked organizations, or is being imposed from outside the network. In these settings, decision-making is centralized. This mode of governance is suggested in cases of high trust in the lead organization and a moderate level of consensus about network goals and competences
- *Shared network governance*: all or a subset of the organizations in the network jointly execute governance. In this setting, commitment develops through the equality of the members in symmetrical power distribution. Network governance may appear as

being done collectively, but not all decisions are necessarily made by all members. This form of governance best suits to settings characterized by high levels of goal consensus and trust.

- *Network administrative organization:* A separate external organization performs governance of the network. This organization does not provide services within the network and can be an appointed existing entity or a unit specifically set up for this task. This mode of governance is typically associated with the governance of moderate to large networks, trusted governing organizations, and moderate goal consensus. At the same time, there is a high need for coordination skills.

O'Toole (2007) argues that these three governance modes apply to all networks and, therefore, also to the network governance layer and the GoN layers in the framework in Figure 30-1. The range of modes provides a continuum from democratic to authoritative impacts of metagovernance on GoN and network governance. Both the network lead organization and the shared network governance provide for democratic setups, where the networks (both at GoN and network governance layer) have a strong saying on the impact of metagovernance on their particular network. In the case of an external network administrative organization, this is done by the organization providing metagovernance or its representative. Along this continuum, metagovernance has a range of means to enforce the suggestions of its elements.

In cases of closely aligned agendas of the network partners and Metagovernance, the latter may allow for democratic structures and steer that through governance guidelines, such as policies. Here governance is typically democratic and possibly executed through shared network governance. Tools and communication platforms provided through Metagovernance will help increase transparency between the layers and mutual update of the network partners. In cases where the network partners' agendas are less strongly aligned with that of Metagovernance, a network lead organization may take on the governance role. Alignment of agendas is pursued by developing shared values and norms, such as openness, keeping of promises, good faith, reciprocity, and trust, which may be required in addition to policies and tools. This may be supported by agreeing on long-term mutual objectives and preferences (e.g., more joint projects in the future).

Finally, in cases of divergence of the network partners' and Metagovernance's agendas, a network administrative organization in the form of the investor (or its representative) and its Metagovernance may be used. Here the above-mentioned measures might be used, and if the need arises, more authoritative measures might be added through Metagovernance. These

may include devising penalties, increased control and reporting, policy enforcement, and even network modifications, such as prescribing the ways network partners collaborate or excluding particular partners (O'Toole, 2007).

In summary, the above discussion shows that the institutions executing governance at the GON and network governance layer could vary between internal, shared, and external. Along with this comes a situation contingent implementation, spanning from democratic to authoritative, influenced, if not determined by Metagovernance.

The relationships between the three governance layers

Studies by Unterhitzberger et al. (2022) quantitatively investigated the relationships between the three layers to identify the most influential elements, assuming a causality from the top to the bottom of the framework model. Here Metagovernance is assumed to be the most powerful and permanent form of governance, impacting GoN as the intermediate layer and Metagovernance and GoN jointly impacting the network governance layer.

Results show that on average metagovernance influences both the GoN and network governance layer, showing the crucial role of the investor's metagovernance for the entire network of networks. However, Metagovernance is not static but continuously (reflexively) adjusted to the needs of the subordinated layers to provide them with the appropriate freedom for self-regulation to avoid risking governance failure.

Network governance was validated to comprise Type I (hierarchical) and Type II (networked) governance, which were impacted differently by the other layers. Type I governance is influenced by Metagovernance, albeit mediated by GoN. The clearer the assignment of accountabilities and responsibilities at the GoN layer, the less impact Metagovernance has on Type I governance. Hence these two GoN elements can shield Type I governance from unwanted influences from Metagovernance or stand-in for shortcomings in definitions of accountabilities and responsibilities at the Metagovernance layer.

Metagovernance's impact on Type II governance is very different. The investor's preferences expressed at the Metagovernance layer are directly mirrored at the network governance layer. Thus, more democratic and informal metagovernance preferences strengthen the power of Type II governance, which is the governance of the many networked suppliers and their task orientation. However, the GoN elements of accountabilities, responsibilities, and formation influence the strength of the impact of Metagovernance on Type II governance. Clearer accountabilities and responsibilities at the GoN layer weaken the impact of Metagovernance,

whereas more formality in the selection of partner organizations strengthens the impact of Metagovernance on Type II governance.

In other words, the accountabilities and responsibilities assigned at the GoN layer fine-tune the governance framework. The extent of this fine-tuning happens on a continuum. On one end, just ‘passing through’ the Metagovernance preferences to the Type I and II governance at the network level. At the other end, absorbing and controlling the impact of Metagovernance with the potential for protecting Type I and II governance from Metagovernance influences in the best interest of the project. The clearness of accountabilities and responsibilities are crucial factors in adjusting the governance framework to the situational needs at the project level.

The relationships between the three governance layers and project performance

Do the governance layers impact project performance? Studies by Wang et al. (2022) investigated this by assessing the relationships between the elements of each governance layer and project performance. Their results show that all governance elements together explain approximately 51% of project performance, which is a strong impact. Three elements impact performance: the clearness of accountabilities, responsibilities, and the strengths of Metagovernance.

In detail: the clearer the expression of accountabilities at the GoN layer, the higher the project performance. A clearer expression of responsibilities at the GoN level also leads to performance improvement, albeit moderated by the strengths of Type II governance (i.e., the informal steering of Type II organizations through ad-hoc use of resources and overlapping responsibilities). In cases of weak Type II governance, the GoN responsibilities strongly impact directly on performance (i.e., the weak definition of responsibilities leads to weak performance), but when Type II governance is strong, the impact of GoN responsibilities is dampened (moderate performance, even when GoN responsibilities are weakly defined). Hence, Type II governance provides for performance improvement, no matter how strong or weak the responsibilities are defined at the GoN layer. Figure 30-2 depicts this effect. The scales are normalized; that is, the mean value of each scale is zero, and the units are standard deviations.

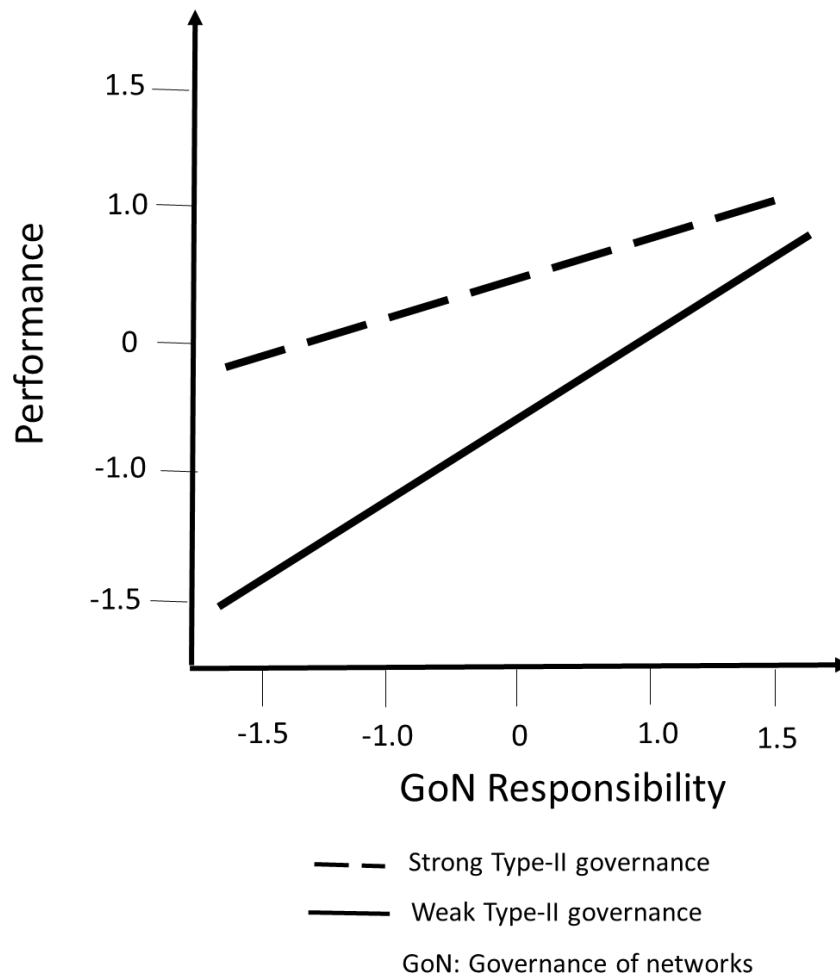


Figure 30-2: Interaction effect of Type II governance (Wang et al., 2022)

Higher expression of the Metagovernance elements leads to higher performance. However, this relationship is moderated by the strictness of structuring defined at the GoN layer (Figure 30-3). In more authoritarian settings, the impact of metagovernance on performance is strong (e.g., low expression of metagovernance leads to low performance and vice versa). However, in democratic settings, this effect is dampened, and low metagovernance leads to less low performance. However, the same dampening happens at higher performance levels, where democratic structure reduces the strong impact of metagovernance and, with it, its rise in performance.

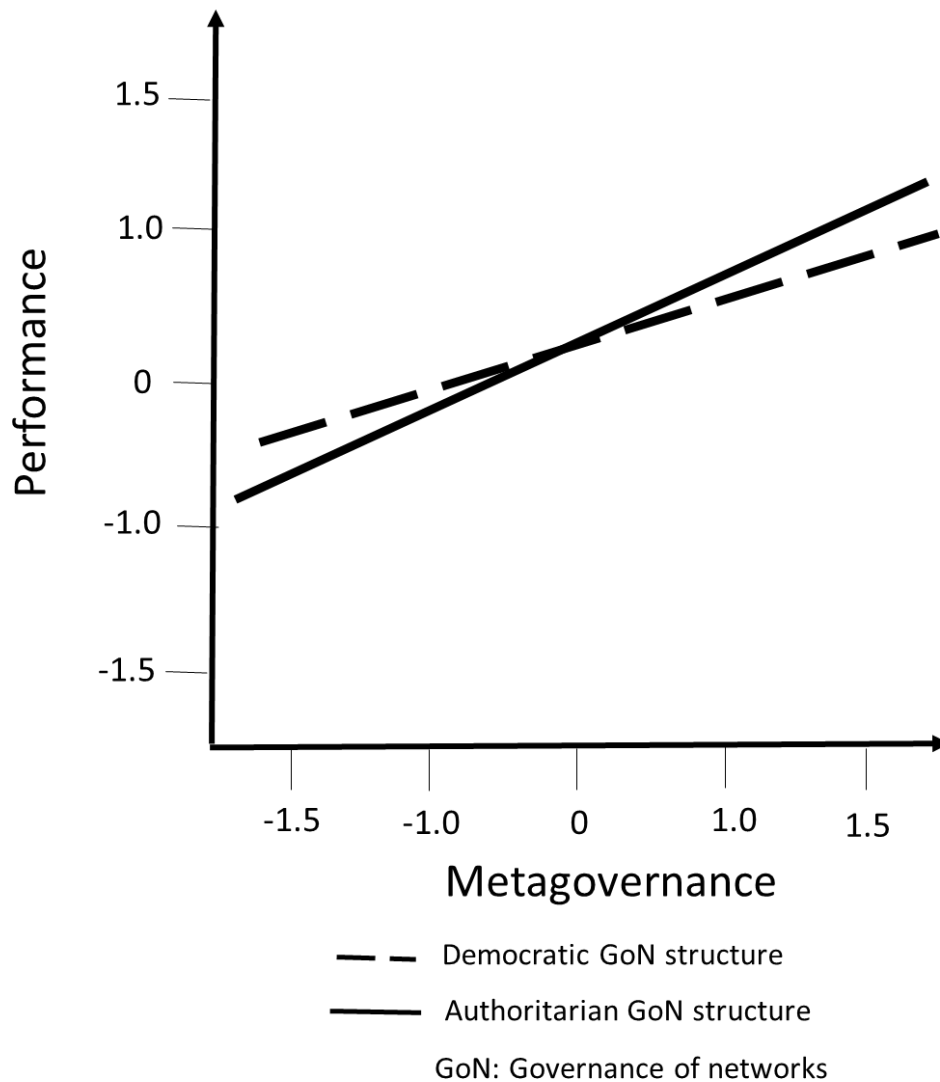


Figure 30-3: Interaction effect of GoN structure (Wang et al., 2022)

The above shows that clearness of metagovernance, accountabilities, and responsibilities directly impact project results. However, this impact is context-dependent in cases of metagovernance and responsibilities. In settings with strong Type II governance, where freedom is given to the delivery organizations to interact informally and ad-hoc, performance is generally higher than in settings with weak Type II governance. Moreover, the possible negative impact of weak definitions of responsibilities is balanced through Type II governance. Metagovernance impacts performance in situational contingency. In settings with strong democratic structures, weak Metagovernance does not impact performance as severely as in authoritarian structures. Contrarily, in authoritarian structures, the strong expression of Metagovernance impacts performance more positively than in democratic structures.

Multi-level governance theory

After having discussed the layers, their elements, and relations, it is now time to describe the theory derived from that. This is done by following (Whetten, 1989) by describing the what (the variables), the how (the interaction between the variables), the why (the reasons behind the interactions), and the boundary conditions in terms of where/when/who (the contextual contingencies).

The variables (the what) in this multi-level (meta)governance theory are Metagovernance, GoN, and network governance as described above. Their timely evolution typically starts with Metagovernance being long-term and most stable, within which the different networks and subsequently their projects emerge. Anyway, situational circumstances may lead to recourse to earlier stages or temporary nesting of layers.

The interaction of the variables (the how) manifests itself in Metagovernance setting the foundation, direction, and limits for GoN. This is done through a careful, situation-contingent balancing of meta-exchange, meta-organization, meta-hierarchy, and meta-solidarity. These four meta-elements define the ground rules in terms of the types of networks allowed and their networking approaches, their level of self-organization, and the ways to select network partners. GoN uses this information to define its governance requirements, the structures (e.g., topologies), accountabilities, and responsibilities of the different networks, and how the networks collaborate. This is taken up at the individual project network governance layer to define how the network internally collaborates, the balance between Type I and Type II governance, and the interface units (clubs, agencies and boards) to be used.

Reasons for these interactions (the why) are in the enabling, disabling, and delimiting nature of higher-level elements on their lower-level counterparts. Examples include meta-exchange, which defines the need and purpose of the networks to be created. Meta-organization defines the characteristics of the types, geographies, and sizes of organizations involved. Meta-hierarchy sets the emphasis on decentralized or centralized power distribution in governance, while meta-solidarity defines the selection and collaboration characteristics. These requirements are passed on to GoN, which defines the GoN setup. Examples include meta-hierarchy suggestions being translated into a preference for orchestrated or emerging network formation at the GoN layer. This, in turn, influences network governance. For example, when preferences for orchestrated networks and their emphasis on formal network formation and relationships at GoN lead to more hierarchical networks at the network governance layer. Similarly works Metagovernance's meta-organization suggestion. For

example, by Metagovernance allowing only organizations with fully trained employees to participate, the number of networks to be created at the GoN layer is reduced because no training or knowledge sharing networks are required. This leads to a reduction of organizations at the network governance layer to only those with a fully trained workforce. The contextual contingencies of the above theory to hold are in the size of the networks. The theory was originally derived from a context of large, mainly infrastructure-type projects. Even though it was also tested and validated quantitatively in a variety of other contexts, there is still a likelihood that smaller networks include further, yet unknown, variables and contingencies. Another boundary condition is the voluntary collaboration of organizations. Studies have shown that organizations join networks because they trust the network partners and themselves to be capable of delivering the project successfully. To that end, trust in the network partners becomes a critical boundary condition. Organizations not joining a network for trust reasons (perhaps because of earlier bad experiences) may disturb the fit between GoN and network governance in respect of power symmetry, democratic/hierarchical governance attempts, or skill sets.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a three-layered governance framework for inter-organizational projects and its underlying theory. It is the first to explain governance from the investor level via the multi-network level to the individual network for project execution. To that end, the chapter provided the layers and their elements, conceptual and empirical evidence of the interaction between the layers and elements, and between the elements and the projects' performance.

More research is needed in this relatively young field of investigation. The above studies relied to a large extent on theories from political science, which were successfully validated in project contexts. Nevertheless, future studies should investigate the possibility of further project context-specific elements. More research is also needed on the different types of projects and their implications for the model. Moreover, researchers are encouraged to inquire into the next level of detail, such as the nature of each of the elements and suitable measurement constructs for them.

The chapter has provided some essential insight into governance of projects, which can now be used by firms, industries, and mankind for more effective and efficient project delivery in the face of global challenges which need to be addressed through networks of partners.

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