The metagovernance of public innovation
in governance networks

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Abstract

Western liberal governments increasingly seek to solve governance problems by enhancing the innovative capacity of the public sector. While the NPM reform program highlighted strategic entrepreneurial leadership and competition as key drivers of public innovation, a new strand of public innovation theories claims that collaboration between relevant and affected public and private actors holds a high innovation potential, and that governance networks can serve as productive arenas for collaborative policy and service innovation. The paper argues that the extent to which governance networks contribute to the innovation of public governance depends on how they are metagoverned. The paper aims to take the first steps in

developing a metagovernance strategy for promoting public innovation in governance networks.

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1. Introduction

Western liberal governments increasingly view public innovation as a tool for solving pressing governance problems such as those related to meeting citizen expectation in times of fiscal constraints, solving wicked problems in public service delivery, alleviating policy execution problems, and counter low growth rates on an increasingly competitive global market. Until recently, innovation was viewed as relevant for the private sector, only, but today it is broadly recognized that it is both possible and necessary to innovative the public sector as well. While private innovation concerns the development of new products to be sold on a market, public innovation involves the formulation, realization and diffusion of new public policies and services. The first efforts to innovate the public sector took departure in traditional private sector innovation theories that saw strategic leadership and competition as the main drivers of innovation (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). However, a new strand of public sector innovation theory takes its departure in alternative theories of private innovation (Teece, 1992; Edquist and Hommen, 1999; Eggers and Singh, 2009) and interactive governance research (Borins, 2001, 2013; Osborne, 2010; Bommert, 2010; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011). The authors view collaboration between interdependent actors as a key driver of innovation, and nominate governance networks as a valuable framework for enhancing collaborative innovation (Freeman, 1991; Dente, Bobbio and Spada, 2005; Glor, 2005; Bland et al, 2010; Considine, Lewis and Alexander, 2010).

The aim of this paper is to argue that if governance networks are to contribute to public policy and service innovation they must be metagoverned with this purpose in mind. A metagovernance strategy for enhancing public innovation in governance networks must promote collaborative innovation in all the different phases in an innovation process. The paper starts out by describing some of the challenges that motivate contemporary Western governments to call for public innovation, and move on to discussing how collaboration can contribute to the formulation, realization and diffusion of public policies and services. After having pointed out how governance networks can serve as arenas for collaborative innovation, I argue that their innovative capacity depends on how they are metagoverned. The paper concludes with a number of propositions regarding how to metagovern governance networks in the pursuit of public innovation.

2. Public innovation on the agenda

It is a complicated matter to determine why a policy issue rises to the top of the agenda at a certain point in time. Nevertheless, I will point to four structural conditions that have put pressure on Western liberal governments to enhance the innovative capacity of the public sector: the fiscal crisis, the proliferation of wicked problems, growing policy-execution problems, and low growth rates. First, as pointed out by Christopher Hood (2010) in a recent report to the Swedish government, public innovation is an attractive alternative for governments in times of fiscal austerity. Instead of making hard and unpopular political choices or across-the-board-cuts Governments public innovation holds the promise that it is possible to provide more and better

solutions and welfare services for the same, and even fewer, public resources. Second, as argued by governance researchers such as Jan Kooiman (2003) and Erik-Hans Klijn and Joop Koppenjan (2004) public authorities face a growing number of unsolved wicked problems. These problems are complex and there are no easy solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Among the wicked problems that call for new and innovative solutions are child obesity, gang-related crime, long-term unemployment, traffic congestion in large cities and climate change. Governments are on the outlook for new innovative methods that enhance their capacity to deal with these problems. As a third structural condition that puts public innovation on the policy agenda, is a rise in policy-execution problems. Policy failure has traditionally been viewed as resulting from implementation problems (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Lipsky, 1980), but it has recently been pointed out that such failures also result from flawed and uninformed policies (Macmillan and Cain, 2010). This understanding of the causes of policy failure has triggered a search for new organizational set ups and procedures that promote the development of new policies that are not only in line with the desires of the citizens and politicians but also realisable. Examples of such organizational and procedural innovations are the many new national and local democratic experiments that are currently seeing the light of the day around the world (Smith, 2009). Other examples are the mushrooming of new transnational political institutions and governance arrangements that assist governments in dealing with cross-border policy problems such as trafficking, terrorism, pandemics, financial instability and food safety (Zürn, 2000; Enderlein et al., 2010; Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). Finally, Western liberal governments are experiencing increasing competitive pressures from China and other growth economies. In order to maintain a strong welfare economy Western governments are intensifying their efforts to ensure that national business have the best possible conditions for growth. In doing so, they aim to develop the educational system, the infrastructure, and regulatory tools in ways that promote the short term as well as the long term competitiveness of domestic business firms (Porter, 1990).

As we have seen, the four structural governance challenges call for different kinds of public innovation: The economic crisis calls for public service innovation; the proliferation of wicked problems calls for policy innovation; the policy execution problems call for organizational and procedural innovations of the policy making process; and the increasing competition between National economies calls for systems innovations. Exactly how public governors and policy-entrepreneurs will react to these structural challenges is difficult to say and subject to variation, depending on differing social and political conditions. However, the costs of failing to respond to the structural challenges will grow over time and the pressure on public authorities to begin the uncertain innovation journey will increase. In light of these challenges it is no wonder that most Western governments have put public innovation on the top of the policy agenda.

3. Collaboration as driver of public innovation

Then, how can the public sector become more innovative? Traditional theories of private sector innovation (Schumpeter, 1946) have pointed to entrepreneurial business leaders and competition as the main drivers of innovation. Inspired by this way of thinking, the New Public Management reform program of the 1980s and 1990 (Hood, 1991; Osborne and Gaebler, 1993) set out to enhance public innovation by introducing these drivers in the public sector. That entrepreneurial leadership and competition can drive policy innovation was not new to the public sector (Polsby, 1984; Kingdon, 1984), but the NPM program took this one step further by introducing strategic forms of

management and competition between public service providers into the public sector (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004).

A new strand of theories of public innovation, however, points to collaboration as an important driver of innovation. The new interest in collaboration as a key driver of public innovation has found inspiration both in recent developments in private sector innovation theory (Lundvall, 1985; Teece, 1992; Edquist and Hommen, 1999: Edquist, 2005) and new developments within governance research (Borins, 2001, 2014; Hartley, 2005; Nambisan, 2008; Bommert, 2010; Osborne, 2010; Brown and Osborne, 2013; Torfing, et al, 2013). They argue that collaboration between relevant and affected actors such as public actors from different corners of the public sector such as politicians, public managers and public professionals and citizens and users of public services, business firms and NGOs can contribute to promoting innovation in all the different phases of an innovation process. Collaboration between different actors with relevant knowledge, experiences and resources can create new ways of understanding a policy problem, develop new creative ideas, qualify the selection of ideas, transform and test the selected innovative ideas, evaluate their functionality, and finally diffuse them to relevant audiences (Eggers and Singh, 2009; Sørensen and Torfing, 2011). Dialogue between public authorities and those who are affected by public governance can help to clarify the nature of the problem that needs to be addressed, and it can also trigger creative destructions of existing ideas and thereby pave the way for new ideas that can inspire policy making and service delivery. Bringing together actors with a broad variety of insights about a governance issue can also qualify the selection of ideas that it is worthwhile developing and testing, and the creative construction and reconstruction of prototypes can benefit from the involvement of actors with different competencies, values and norms. Finally, new innovative policies and services will be evaluated with reference to a variety of relevant criteria, and there will be many innovation ambassadors that will feel committed to diffuse new innovations to all corners in society.

The new collaborative approach to public innovation clarifies that strategic entrepreneurial leadership and competition are not sufficient to enhance the innovative capacity of the public sector. Although leadership is important for initiating and authorizing innovative endeavours, and competition motivates actors to strive for change, collaboration drives the formulation, realization and diffusion of innovations (Hartley, Sørensen and Torfing, 2013). Therefore, a viable strategy for enhancing public sector innovation must aim to exploit the innovation potential of collaborative governance arenas.

4. Governance networks as arenas for collaborative policy innovation

Governance theory points to governance networks as a productive institutional framework for collaboration between relevant and affected public and private actors (Scharpf, 1994; Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997; Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). A governance network can be defined as *a temporal institutionalization of a forum of interdependent but operationally autonomous and self-governing actors who collaborate in a shared effort to realize negotiated objectives that contribute to what ranks as public purpose at a given point in time*. The strength of governance networks,

compared to other forms of governance such as hierarchies and markets, is that their form and composition can be adjusted so as to fit a specific purpose and occasion. Moreover, the presence of interdependency and the fact that the objective is negotiated ensures that the participating actors are highly motivated and committed to meeting the shared objective. Governance researchers have pointed out how this ability to enroll relevant and affected actors in the provision of public governance makes governance networks a valuable means to enhance either the efficiency and effectiveness of public governance (Kooiman, 1993; Klijn and Koppenjan, 2004) or the democratic quality of liberal democracy (Klijn and Skelcher, 2006). Only recently have governance researchers begun to consider how governance networks can contribute to promoting public innovation (Freeman, 1991; Dente, Bobbio and Spada, 2005; Glor, 2005; Bland et al, 2010; Considine, Lewis and Alexander, 2010). They argue that governance networks can function as temporal arenas in which a broad variety of relevant and affected can bring different perspectives to the table and develop viable problem definitions and engage in a shared endeavor to develop new methods and solutions that work.

Governance theorists tend to agree, however, that governance networks must be metagoverned they are to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness, democratic quality and innovative capacity of public governance. Hence, governance networks do not always include all the relevant and affected actors; those who are included might find it difficult to collaborate, and it is far from certain that the outcome of the collaboration process is exploited to its full potential and aligned with larger governance initiatives. The degree to which a governance network contribute to enhancing the *efficiency and effectiveness* of public governance networks depends on to what extent it activates and exploits all relevant resources. Their contribution to enhancing the *democratic quality* of public governance depends on whether the governance network is anchored in affected constituencies; and, as described later in more detail, the *innovation potential* of governance networks depends on whether or not the participants are able to develop, realize and diffuse new creative ideas. The purpose of metagoverning networks is to increase their ability to meet one or more of these objectives.

Efforts to govern governance networks must take into account that they, as a defining factor, are autonomous and self-governing. Therefore, if governance networks are governed in traditional hierarchical ways their functionality will be undermined. This does not mean, however, that governance networks cannot be governed. Governance theorists point to a number of mechanisms that can be taken into use in an effort to govern governance networks and other self-governing actors. These mechanisms for governing self-governance have been given many names, but in this context I will summarize them under the name meta-governance (Kooiman, 1993, 2003; Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997; Jessop, 1998, 2002; Sørensen and Torfing, 2007, 2009). The four main forms of metagovernance described in the literature are summarized in table 1.

	Limited intervention	*Strong Intervention*
Hands-off	1) Policy and resource framing	2) Institutional design
Hands-on	3) Facilitation	4) Participation

Table 1: Forms of metagovernance

These four forms of metagovernance can be taken into use by what has been denoted a metagovernor that is an actor who aims to use a governance network for a specific purpose.

1) Metagovernors can influence governance networks by defining the overall political objectives that the governance network must address and by distributing the financial resources that are available to them. This is done hands-off and at a distance, and it is not an overly interventionist form of metagovernance because it merely influences the operative conditions of governance network but leaves it up to the network actors to decide how to self-govern within this overall political and financial framework.

2) Governance networks can also be metagoverned hands-off through the strategic design of the institutional set up within which they operate. The term institutional design is tricky because it both points to the formal institutional set up of a governance arena, the incentives structures it provides and the universe of meaning and identity positions it constructs. The call for temporality and interdependence in governance networks means that governance networks are most efficiently metagoverned through the design of incentives and narratives that add meaning and purpose to its activities. These kinds of institutional design are interventionist in the sense that they aim to influence the decisions made and actions taken by a governance network.

3) While metagovernance through policy and resource framing and institutional design can be exercised hands-off and at a distance by entrepreneurial political leaders in government offices, hands-on forms of metagovernance are exercised in direct interaction with a governance network. A skillful facilitation of the collaboration processes within a network can help to generate trust and mutual understanding between the network actors, and to cope with the conflicts and trouble that occur in the negotiation processes. This metagovernance method does not intervene very strongly in the activities in the network but merely aim to enhance its self-governance capacity.

4) Finally, metagovernors can participate as members in a governance network. This kind of metagovernance is interventionist in the sense that it allows the metagovernor to take active part in and thereby influence the negotiation processes in the network. This method is useful as a means to support the other forms of metagovernance from within the network, and thereby, align the network activities with the more general governance ambitions pursued by the metagovernor.

The four metagovernance tools should be viewed as complementary rather than as alternatives. Hands-off forms of governance can benefit from being supplemented by hands-on metagovernance because the latter helps to clarify if political, legal and other kinds of framing and institutional designs have the intended impact, and hands-on forms of metagovernance rarely function well if they are not underpinned by hands-off forms of governance. Moreover, a skillful combination of more or less interventionist forms of metagovernance makes it possible for a metagovernor to grant governance networks the autonomy and support they need to contribute to public governance without losing the overall capacity to push society in a desired direction. The metagovernance of governance networks is a complex and different matter, and it can easily go wrong. It consists in a careful balancing of two opposites: being able to control a governance network, and granting it the autonomy needed to function well. Too much control undermines the self-governing capacity of governance networks, and too little intervention results in fragmentation and lack of direction and coordination in governance initiatives.

Then, who can step into the role as metagovernor of governance networks? First of all, if metagovernors are to be successful they must have the skills and capacities needed to find the right mix between the different forms of metagovernance. Skills and capacities are not enough, however. Successful metagovernors must also possess what Christopher Hood denotes NATO-resources: N stands for nodality, A for authority, T for treasure, and O for organization (Hood, 1983). Although other actors also sometimes possess one or more of these resources, public authorities are in a strong position as metagovernors because they have privileged access to these resources. Politicians have the authority and treasure to frame and participate in governance networks, and public administrators have the nodality and organization to design and facilitate collaborative governance arenas.

5. Metagovernance for different purposes

As mentioned earlier, metagovernors can seek to govern governance networks for different purposes, and governance network theorists have in particular pointed to three possible purposes. A metagovernor can aim to enhance the capacity of a governance network to contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of public governance, but the goal of the metagovernor can also be to ensure that a governance network promotes democracy or public innovation. Each purpose calls for a particular metagovernance strategy that uses and combines the four forms of metagovernance described above in different ways. As described in more detail elsewhere (Sørensen and Torfing, 2009), a metagovernance strategy that aims to use governance networks as a means to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of public governance must use the different forms of metagovernance to: 1) Bring together actors with resources that are relevant in relation to the policy issue in question; 2) Motivate the actors in the governance network to pool their resources and use them in a shared effort to solve specific governance tasks; and 3) Engage them in assessing and adjusting the way the governance task in question is carried out by the larger governance system. In contrast, a metagovernance strategy for enhancing democracy should use the different forms of metagovernance to ensure that: 1) Those affected by specific governance initiatives are included in relevant governance networks; 2) The network actors govern themselves in accordance with existing democratic norms and rules, report their actions to elected politicians and represent and are accountable to affected constituencies; and 3) Governance networks are linked to the institutions of representative democracy in ways that contributes to re-enfranchise liberal democracy. As suggested in other writings, this can be done by promoting the democratic anchorage of governance networks in relevant democratically legitimized constituencies and in a hegemonic democratic grammar of conduct (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005).

While some thoughts have been made regarding how to metagovern governance networks in ways that enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and democratic anchorage of governance networks, there has been no attempt to specify a metagovernance strategy for employing governance networks in enhancing collaborative innovation. I shall claim that if governance networks are to contribute to the promotion of public innovation they must be metagoverned, and that this calls for metagovernance strategy designed for this particular purpose.

6. Metagoverning collaborative innovation in governance networks

The promotion of collaborative innovation in governance networks calls for a specific metagovernance strategy, because it is necessary to involve different actors, to accommodate the collaboration process in different ways than if the goal is efficiency, effectiveness or democracy, and to transfer different outcomes to the larger political system. The main characteristics of the three metagovernance strategies are described in table 2:

	Efficiency and effectiveness	*Democratic Anchorage*	*Collaborative innovation*
What actors should be included in the network?	Actors with supplementary resources (e.g. knowledge, manpower and money) that are relevant and productive for carrying out governance tasks	Strongly affected actors that should have privileged access to influence particular governance decisions	Actors with diverging perspectives on a governance task, and possess assets and capacities such as fantasy, creativity, and craftsmanship and entrepreneurial spirit
What should the network actors be encouraged to do?	Pool their resources and use them in a shared effort and engaged effort to perform the governance task in question	Collaborate in accordance with hegemonic democratic norms and rules, report their actions to elected politicians and represent and be accountable to affected constituencies	Engage in ways that promote a creative destruction of existing beliefs and practices and launch risky experiments and prototyping of new ideas
What can be done to ensure that governance networks improve the functioning of the larger system of governance?	Involve the network actors in assessing and adjusting existing governance practices	Link governance networks and representative democracy in ways that re-enfranchise liberal democracy	Encourage the network actors to diffuse the network's innovations beyond the boundaries of the governance network.

Table 2: Three metagovernance strategies

Since I have discussed the metagovernance strategies for promoting efficient, effective and democratic public governance elsewhere, the reminder of this paper will focus on how public authorities can enhance pubic innovation through the metagovernance of networks. If governance networks are to contribute to public governance, metagovernors must fulfill three tasks: 1) Inspire governance networks to include actors who possess key innovation assets and capacities such as fantasy, creativity, craftsmanship and entrepreneurial spirit; 2) Urge the network actors to collaborate in ways that stimulate, first, the creative destructions of existing beliefs and practices, and, second, their willingness to take the risks that are involved in carrying out experiments and developing and testing prototypes; and 3) Encourage the governance network to diffuse its innovations beyond the boundaries of the network to the benefit of other governance actors.

Then, how can the four forms of metagovernance contribute to solving these three metagovernance tasks? Let us first discuss *how a metagovernor can inspire a governance network to include actors with assets and capacities relevant for promoting public innovation*. It is always difficult for metagovernors to influence who is included in a governance network because whether or not they

are included in practice in the end depends on the willingness of the network actors to include them. The challenges related to getting governance networks to involve actors with assets and capacities necessary for innovation might prove to be more difficult than when it comes to involving actors that can contribute to enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of public governance, because the resources they possess such as knowledge, manpower and money are easily communicated and visualized as means to create interdependencies. The value of including creative entrepreneurs with wild ideas might be less obvious and more risky. In consequence, metagovernors must be expected to put pressure on the network actors to include such actors, and this calls for interventionist forms of metagovernance.

Interventionist forms of hands-off meta-governance are valuable in this context. First of all, a metagovernor can create and authorize formal collaborative arenas that include actors with innovation assets and capacities. The limited impact of formal network arenas is, however, that they might ensure external inclusion but not internal inclusions (Young, 2000). The innovative actors might participate at the meetings but they might not get the attention of the other network actors. In order to ensure that they are also internally included, the metagovernor can design incentives that put pressure on the governance network to produce innovations and produce narratives that highlight the need for change in the way things have traditionally been done. This kind of incentives steering and narration can be further supported by hands-off political framing that places innovation high on the political agenda, and hands-off budget schemes. The purpose of these metagovernance initiatives is to illuminate and further strengthen the interdependency that motivate governance networks to include actors with assets and capacities that are needed to innovate public services and policies. The above mentioned ways of affecting the composition of a governance network can be further enforced if the metagovernor participates in the governance network, and use this participation as a platform for highlighting the innovation agenda for recognizing and celebrating the contributions of those who contribute to developing new innovative policies and services. Skillful network facilitation can support participating metagovernors in this endeavor to place innovative actors in the center of the network activities.

The next question is how a metagovernor can encourage forms of collaboration that lead to a creative destruction of existing beliefs and practices and the courage and will to launch risky experiments and prototyping aiming to realize new promising ideas. The first objective of accommodating creative destructions calls for skillful network facilitation because the confrontation of different views perspectives and beliefs tends to produce high levels of conflict. It is selfdom a peaceful process to place actors in a situation where they are confronted with insights that challenge sedimented interpretations of the world. Therefore, it is important to facilitate the process in order to ensure that efforts to depart from existing beliefs that block the development of new innovations, leads to a constructive collaborative search for new alternative ideas and perspectives rather than to destructive conflicts. Participating metagovernors can assist in this facilitation process by being the first one to renounce their traditional position on a matter and stress the need to think in new ways. The second objective of getting the network actors to muster the courage to perform risky experiments and employ resources and energy into testing and developing prototypes, calls for hands of metagovernance, and in particular the strategic design of incentives. Hence, the degree to which network actors are willing to take risks and live with the high level of uncertainly regarding outcomes that are inherent to innovation attempts, depends on what can be gained. If networks are rewarded not only for the innovations they produce but also for their less successful attempts to innovate, their willingness to invest energy and resources will be much higher.

Finally, metagovernors must urge innovative governance networks to diffuse their innovations to relevant public and private actors outside the network. If new innovative products, procedures, and organizational forms are not diffused to those who could benefit from applying them in other contexts, the system fails to exploit the innovation to its full potential. Metagovernors can enhance network innovations in

a number of ways. First, they can design digital communication channels and platforms that make it easy and even prestigious for governance networks to spread their findings. They can also arrange case competitions and fund awards to be given to particularly innovative networks. As yet another institutional design instrument metagovernors can create benchmarking events where different networks meet, compare and exchange innovations. Such events are valuable because they do not only diffuse the innovative outcomes but also all the experiences made in trying to overcome barriers that occurred along the way in the innovation process. Participation in innovative governance networks is also important for the diffusion of innovations because the participating metagovernor becomes both a scout that brings knowledge about new network innovation back into the larger governance system and an ambassador that distributes the innovations to relevant target groups outside the network.

As illustrated above, there are multiple ways in which a metagovernor can promote the ability of governance networks produce new innovative public policies and services, and all the four forms of metagovernance can be brought into use. As we have also seen, it is important that the metagovernor keeps the overall purpose and goal in focus, and select the metagovernance strategy that fits the purpose. Choosing the right strategy makes it possible not only to exploit the capacity of governance networks to enhance the efficiency, effectiveness and democratic quality of public governance, but also to enhance public innovation.

7. Conclusion

Today, public authorities all over the Western world seek to solve mounting governance challenges by enhancing the innovative capacity of the public sector. While the first strategies for enhancing public innovation celebrated hierarchical entrepreneurial leadership and competition as key drivers of public innovation, recent strategies that take their departure in emerging strands of innovation theory and governance theory put their faith in collaboration between relevant and affected public and private actors. Moreover, these theories of collaborative innovation view governance networks as promising innovation arenas. The purpose of the paper was to discuss how and under what conditions governance networks can contribute to promoting public service and policy innovation, and its main message is that the degree to which governance networks adds to the enhancement of public innovation depends on to what extent and how it is metagoverned. What is called is the employment of a metagovernance strategy designed for this particular purpose that deviates from the metagovernance strategies used to promote efficient, effective and democratic governance. The paper has drawn the first contours of a metagovernance strategy for promoting public innovation through collaboration in governance networks, but far more work needs to be done. This work involves theoretical reflections as well as empirical studies of efforts to apply the different forms of metagovernance in different contexts. Although the paper signals a modest beginning on a huge task, I do hope, however, that the paper has succeeded in communicating that there is a growing pressure on the public sector to improve its innovation capacity, that collaboration represents one out of a number of important driver of public innovation, that governance networks has the potential to serve as arenas for collaborative policy and service innovation, and finally, that we need to design a specific metagovernance strategies for this particular purpose of promoting collaborative public innovation in governance networks.

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