The emergence of network structures in social service delivery: the case of the local social policy in Belgium

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Introduction

As the challenges in contemporary civil societies got increasingly complex, the public sector became more dependent upon nonprofits and other private organizations for implementing its social policies (Salamon 1995). When tackling so-called 'wicked issues' (e.g. health care, poverty or homelessness) both the public and private sectors acknowledge that considerable resource dependencies do occur and that working independently is not enough (Rittel and Webber 1973; Agranoff and McGuire 2001; Klijn 2008). As a matter of fact, these problems defy precise definition and generally cut across policy and service areas (Clarke and Stewart 1997). It has therefore been argued that new and innovative ways of thinking are required that are highly flexible and more inclusive (Alter and Hage 1993; Huxham and Vangen 1996). The concept of network structures, as an alternative to traditional hierarchical governance or coordination through market mechanisms, is at the forefront of this move (Powell 1990; O'Toole 1997; Kickert and Koppenjan 1997). The prevailing view amongst governments and the private organizations is that, by integrating services through a network of providing agencies, clients will gain benefits of reduced fragmentation and greater coordination (Provan and Milward 2001). As each partner brings distinctive competencies to the collaborative endeavors, it is generally assumed that these structures have the ability to unlock the benefits of comparative advantage (Gazley and Brudney 2007; Andrews and Entwistle 2010).

Today, it is widely acknowledged that these networks operate within a notion of governance (Klijn 2008). There is a persuasive, shared, global perception of governance as a topic far broader than 'government'. In general terms, governance is seen as a new process or method by which society is governed (Rhodes 1996). It refers to the development of governing styles in which boundaries between and within the public and the private sectors have become blurred (Stoker 1998). The essence of governance is its focus on mechanisms that do not rest on the authority and sanctions of government (Rhodes 1997; Peters & Pierre 1998). Governance is most often presented as an attempt to improve coordination between relatively independent actors and it primarily involves the horizontal steering or relations across networks (Klijn 2008).

However, as networks, and governance through networks, are rapidly becoming new buzzwords in the public sector, there is a risk that these concepts lose their edge and become synonymous with all forms of collaboration between the public and private sector (Frederickson 2005). Therefore, the study of networks must build on rigorous definitions.

This paper draws upon a definition of networks as a group of organizations, both public and private ones, which have a stake in a problem and seek mutually determined solutions they could not achieve by working alone (Peters 1998; Sink 1998). Although we agree that network members retain independent decision-making powers, it is generally assumed that each party is, to some or lesser extent, dependent upon resources controlled by another, and that there are gains to be had by pooling these resources (Powell 1990; Wood and Gray 1991). This equally implies that network participants are tied by a form of structural interdependence in which one unit is not the subordinate of others by virtue of its formal position (O'Toole 1997). Instead, members rather see themselves as a unique piece of a total issue making them eager to develop synergies and to bring together the specific resources and competencies from different sectors (Lowndes and Skelcher 1998; Keast, Mandell, et.al. 2004; Entwistle and Martin 2005).

In recent years a substantial amount of research, both from a quantitative and a qualitative perspective, has been conducted on the structural and operational characteristics of these networks. Still, surprisingly less attention has been paid to the actual effectiveness of such networks (Provan and Milward 2001; Turrini, Christofoli et.al. 2009). It has already been stated that the literature on collaboration through networks is often celebratory and only rarely cautious (Berry et al. 2004). So, after a period of network euphoria, during which the presence of networks was considered as something positive per se, we might now face questions as to whether and under what conditions networks are actually performing at a level that justifies the costs of collaboration, which can be very substantial (Kenis and Provan 2009).

By creating a framework for conducting qualitative case studies this paper will address the issue of network effectiveness into more detail. When searching for key determinants of network effectiveness, the focus will be on the network management activities performed by a central steering agency within the network. In other words, we question whether networks are actually capable of unlocking these distinctive competencies in practice, and if so, how network management might contribute to this. These questions will be studied against the background of the increased cooperation between government and the nonprofit sector for planning en delivering social services to citizens in a modern welfare state like Flanders, the Dutch speaking region of Belgium.

This paper is structured as follows. After having outlined the research context in Flanders, we primarily have to enhance comprehension about what effectiveness actually means and how it can be measured. Second, it will be explained why network management should be considered as a key determinant for network effectiveness. Third, a framework will be provided about how to study these management behaviors, as performed by a central agency within a network, in practice. Fourth, the research questions and methodological approach will be presented. In a final section, we will elaborate on how this study might contribute to the discussion on networks, network effectiveness and the role of a central agency in steering network activities. This will eventually result in some suggestions we have to bear in mind when empirically studying these questions in the near future.

Setting the research context

Starting from the overall objective to maximize the access of citizens to the range of basic social services they need, the Flemish Decree on local social policy (2004) aimed at increasing the interaction and cooperation between local governments, as being the closest level to citizens, and private organizations that are active on their territory. In the majority of Flemish cities we do observe a multitude of private actors, mostly with a nonprofit character, in the field of local social policy. This might be explained by two evolutions: pillarization and the intentional policy of subsidiarity. Pillarization has led to situation in which ideological driven 'pillars' (both a catholic and a pluralistic one) could develop dense networks of social service delivery. Subsequently, the policy of subsidiarity, especially by governments and politicians that are ideologically related to these pillars, made it possible to recognize and financially support these private initiatives in the context of the expansion of the welfare state during the 20th century. This had made the nonprofit sector an important actor in the delivery of social services in Flanders.

The collaboration, as prescribed by the Decree, must be realized both at the strategic level of policy development and at the operational level of service delivery. In this paper the focus is on the cooperation for jointly planning and/ or producing publicly funded social services. Essentially, the Decree must hereby be seen as a general framework, which leaves local authorities with substantial levels of autonomy in setting and pursuing their own social priorities. Still, the Decree equally suggests the creation of networks, or the formalization of existing networks, as an excellent means to structure the cooperation with the private nonprofit sector. Hence, in every Flemish municipality, we recently witnessed the emergence of network structures that have been established around particular policy issues such as child care facilities, elderly care, homelessness, etc.

Furthermore, the Decree also entails a more tactical component by assigning local authorities with a task to operate as a central agency steering and coordinating the actions of the different public and private actors involved in these networks. Still, it must be stated that in Flanders, from a historical perspective, there are two democratically legitimized public actors at this local level that are both key players in the field of local social policy. Each municipality has its elected local council and also one public center for social welfare (OCMW), whose council is indirectly elected by the city council. Starting from its legal mission to guarantee the social welfare of all citizens in the municipality, the OCMW may for example organize its own facilities (e.g. in elderly care, child care, hospitals, etc.). As local councils are obliged to take care of all problems of 'local concern', including the social issues, the coordination of activities and priorities *within* the public sector could be seen as a prerequisite for effective coordination with the private nonprofit sector. In this paper we will, however, not specifically address this issue of coordination between the local council and OCMW. From a historical perspective, it could be argued that in some municipalities the local council will be the dominant actor dealing with social issues, while in others the OCMW will perform a far more broader role. We argue that it is less important which actor does actually perform a role as central agency in steering the local social policy, than the point that this mutual agreement must be established. In the remainder of this paper we will therefore refer to local government, albeit the local council or the OCMW, as the steering actor.

The complex task of evaluating network effectiveness

Despite problems regarding conceptualization and measurement, a reasonable analysis of network effectiveness is critical to justify the support of those organizations that make up the network, those who are served by the network and those whose policy and funding actions affect the network (Provan and Milward 2001; Provan and Kenis 2007). As the evaluation of network effectiveness is at the center of interest in this paper, a framework must be provided in order to understand what effectiveness means and to determine the criteria that must be considered in its assessment (Provan and Milward 2001; Kenis and Provan 2009). This paper draws upon insights derived from an extensive review of literature on network effectiveness and its determinants (for an overview see for example Provan, Fish et.al. 2007; Turrini, Christofoli et.al. 2009). More specifically, it is argued that any study targeting network effectiveness should address two basic questions: what are the levels of analysis to evaluate network effectiveness and what are the criteria through which network effectiveness will be measured.

First, concerning the level of analysis, the problem of evaluating networks is notably acute in view of the multiple stakeholders that can and do lay claim to the organizations that comprise a network. The most important question is then 'effectiveness for whom', because various actors and organizational entities could and will be influenced by the network's behavior (Provan and Kenis 2007). Consistent with this multiple-stakeholder perspective we follow Provan and Milward (2001) who argue that networks might be evaluated at three levels of analysis: the community level, the network itself and the level of network's organizational participants. First, at the broadest level, networks must be judged by the contribution they make to the communities they are trying to serve. Thus, networks must be evaluated as service-delivery vehicles that provide value to local communities, and especially the pool of clients it serves, in ways that could have not been achieved through the uncoordinated provision of services by fragmented and autonomous agencies. To appreciate the network's contribution we could focus on the quality and effectiveness of the provided services to clients (e.g. in terms of service accessibility, service utilization, client well-being). Second, the network itself must become a viable interorganizational entity if it is to survive (Provan and Milward 2001). This refers implicitly to the sustainability, legitimacy and maintenance of the networked structure per se (Turrini, Christofoli, et.al. 2009). Effectiveness at this network level can be assessed in a number of different ways: by analyzing the ebb and flow of agencies to and from the network; the extent to which services that are actually needed by clients are provided by the network; the strength of the relationships between and among network members or by the presence of a central administrative structure (Provan and Milward 2001). Third, network effectiveness might be evaluated at the organizational level. It is important to recognize that individual agencies and their managers will still, at least partly, be motivated by self-interest. Networks can contribute significantly to organization-level outcomes such as resource acquisition, enhanced levels of legitimacy, reduced costs and improved client outcomes (Provan and Milward 2001). Accordingly, it could be necessary to consider the expectations of network participants about these network outcomes, and more specifically, their perception of the evolution of the expected advantages (e.g. increased ability to serve clients, increased ability to acquire additional resources, etc.) and the potential drawbacks (increased efforts in time and resources, loss of autonomy, etc.) (Provan et.al. 2005).

Second, regardless of the level on which effectiveness is studied, differences in operationalization and measurement of network effectiveness might equally depend on the focus on the criteria through which effectiveness is measured (Kenis and Provan 2009). Three measures related to the functioning of the network are of particular importance: the network structure, network processes or the network outcomes (Cristofoli and Maccio 2011).

As far as network structure is concerned, networks can be considered successful when they are able to survive in the long term by gaining high reputation from internal and external stakeholders (Provan and Milward 2001). This ensures for example clients with the possibility to access at services in a stable way and at the network partners the possibility of systematically exploiting network advantages. Mandell and Keast (2008) consider the willingness to continue investing resources in the network activity by critical stakeholders. When turning to the processes, networks can be considered successful when the partner collaboration does work (Cristofoli and Maccio 2011). This is especially the case when collaboration leads to the creation of a new organizational form, existing in se and independently from the network partners (Keast et.al. 2004; Mandell and Keast 2008). Finally, concerning the network outputs, networks can be considered as successful when they are able to reach their expected objectives. In general, the expected outputs of public networks can be expressed in terms of improved efficiency, effectiveness and equity (Provan and Milward 2001; Provan and Kenis 2007).

In the remainder of this paper network effectiveness is then defined as the attainment of positive network-level outcomes that could not normally be achieved by individual organizational participants acting independently. First, we follow Kenis and Provan (2009) who argue that public networks should best be evaluated at the network level. The critical issue for both clients and funders most often lies in the performance of the network as a whole and not whether some organizations that are part of the network do a better job than others in providing a particular component of service (Provan and Milward 2001). Obviously, a network may be ineffective if individual organizations within the network do a poor job. But in addition, even though network organizations may provide excellent services on their own, overall network outcomes may be rather low (Provan and Milward 1995). Second, we focus on criteria of network effectiveness that are related to the outcomes of the network activities (Provan and Milward 1995; Provan and Kenis 2007; Kenis and Provan 2009). The specific network-level outcome will depend on the particular constituency assessing the functioning of the network. This implies that no certain outcome will be considered a priori as the correct one because each represents a potentially valid point of view. Such criteria might for example include goal attainment; the productivity of the network; the quality of care; equity or the improved integration of critical services to vulnerable populations. As every criterion can be considered as a 'norm', this implies that any decision about these criteria used in assessing the performance of a network is in fact a normative decision. There is no scientific way to judge whether one criterion is 'better' than another in assessing the effectiveness of the network (Kenis and Provan 2009).

Network management as a determinant for effectiveness

Throughout literature a substantial amount of structural, contextual and functional characteristics have been identified as key determinants for explaining network effectiveness. Instead of providing a complete overview of all these factors (see for example Provan, Fish et.al. 2007; Turrini, Christofoli et.al. 2009) this paper contributes to the debate on network effectiveness by focusing on one particular determinant: the network management by a central organization. The rationale behind this choice is threefold: the expected link between management activities and effectiveness; the crucial role of central agencies in performing these management tasks; and finally the particular position of public agencies in steering network activities.

First of all, a series of recent analysis, both through case-studies as large-N studies, have shown fairly strong correlations between network management activities and network effectiveness (Meier & O'Toole 2001; Agranoff & McGuire 2003; Klijn 2008; Klijn & Edelenbos 2010). In general terms, network management may help to avoid four pitfalls: repetition, omission, divergence and counterproduction (Huxham 2003). Avoidance of repetition has, at its most obvious level, to do with the efficient use of resources due to the fact that organizations are often involved in partially overlapping activities (e.g. building up databases, etc.). In practice, the management of repetition seems to involve making a judgment about where repetition is valuable and where it is wasteful. The avoidance of omission is concerned with ensuring that activities which collaborating organizations regard as important do not get overlooked. Omission could for example occur when the activity is the responsibility of more than one organization so that each assumes that the other is doing it. Avoidance of divergence is concerned with ensuring that resources are used towards common goals rather than diluted across a range of activities. Finally, counterproduction has to do with organizations working in isolation and taking actions which conflict with those taken by others.

Second, scholars have pointed to the presence of a core agency coordinating network activities as a critical determinant for network effectiveness. This finding was especially apparent in the work of Provan and Milward (1995) who used comparative case studies of mental care networks in four large cities in the US to investigate whether the success of the network depended on the structure of community-based networks for mental illness or the context in which they operate. Network effectiveness was assessed at the client level, as being a combination of the actual improvement of the client's health status and client's well-being as perceived by two types of stakeholders in the network – families and therapists. Provan and Milward focused on two categories of determinants, the context of the network (e.g. in terms of stability and resource munificence) and the structural characteristics of the network.

For the purpose of this paper, especially the latter category is of particular importance. It was found that the presence of a central agency, acting as mediator and facilitator for coordinating network activities, was a critical factor for enhancing overall network effectiveness (Provan and Milward 1995). Subsequent empirical studies seemed to confirm that integration that happens through a central actor, aiming at improving coordination and cohesion among network members, is more effective than integration defined through multi-lateral interactions (Provan and Sebastian 1998; Conrad 2003). In that respect, Huxham (2003) has pointed to the issue of leadership 'that makes things happen' within networks.

Third, even if collaboration through networks may rely on various leaders performing different roles at various times, it has been stated that governments are ultimately held accountable for the satisfactory delivery of public goods and services to citizens (Kickert 1997; McGuire 2006). Governments are core actors because they continue to possess a legitimacy to approach public problems and retain important legal authority to set rules and norm. Furthermore, they contribute financial resources to programs (Agranoff 2003). So, in the typical context of collaborative public management, public managers can't always command action, but they are still responsible for their collaborative outcomes (McGuire 2002). Network management therefore is a crucial task for public agencies.

Considering the above arguments, this paper argues that the case of the local social policy in Flanders is very suitable to find out whether the management by a central agency will enhance the overall effectiveness of the network. More specifically, we will determine the capacity and willingness of local authorities in Flanders to perform this complex role as a director in steering cooperation with private actors within network structures. As outlined before, local governments have been recently assigned with a task in enhancing cooperation with the private nonprofit suppliers on their territory and to perform a central role in managing and steering network activities and joint efforts.

Towards a framework for network management

Despite the growing recognition, both by scholars and practioneers, of the importance of managing network activities questions remain on whether what these concrete tasks are and how to measure them. This is particularly difficult because the allocation of managerial resources in network structures might sometimes be rather fluid as the utilization of management behaviors may vary across time and space within in a given project. Emphasizing for example the inner stabilization of the network means that, in that particular time and place, less attention can be given to exploiting new opportunities for the network. This variation in the distribution of managerial resources makes observations and identification of this behavior somewhat problematic (McGuire 2002).

Within the literature several attempts have been made to provide a useful framework for the operationalization of network management. In a study on central government agencies within networks, Keast (2003) identifies that central agencies operate at two levels. First, at the strategic level, governments take on the roles that are needed to provide a foundation for any of the networked arrangements to be able to proceed and to be sustained. In general, these strategic roles are providing legitimacy, risk taking and direction setting. A key aspect of this latter role of providing the overall policy direction lies in the specification of the outcomes that were to be achieved (Waterhouse and Keast 2011). Hence, network managers must have a perspective that is broader than their own organization (Rethemeyer and Hatmaker 2007). Second, at the operational level, central agencies adopt more finely tuned functional roles aimed at providing the mechanisms by which networks function on a day to day basis. Here, the roles include enabler, facilitator and catalyst. Enabling refers to a 'hands off' rule in the setting up of the conditions that allow others to develop certain outcomes. Facilitating is a 'hands on' role where government brokers relationships and breaks through barriers of resistance. A catalyst role is where government temporarily adopts a 'hands on' role in network operations only becoming involved in their operation when absolutely necessary and as a means to initiate action and change. These different roles for central agencies do not occur in isolation meaning that a major consideration for government operators within networks is to determine the appropriate format of their engagement to ensure network effectiveness.

By reviewing theoretical and evidence-based studies on network effectiveness Turrini, Christofoli et.al. (2009) identified four 'functioning' characteristics as emerging concepts influencing the overall network effectiveness. First, there is the strategic task of steering network processes that includes direction setting and establishing an overarching mission of the network. Second, traditional managerial work is related to the requirement for network managers to be able to implement systems and to motivate staff to perform within the network environment. Third, generic networking is seen as the ability to effectively interact with individuals outside a manager's direct line of control. Finally, buffering instability (or nurturing stability) involves being able to solve tensions among partners in order to strengthen 'bridges' among the participating organizations (Kickert et.al. 1997). For the purpose of this paper especially this latter category will be of particular interest. These linkages or bridges are built by seeking formal adjustments by the parties through bargaining and negotiating (Agranoff and McGuire 2003). In strengthening the network's inner stability, network managers can create the environment for favorable and productive interactions: they engender participation, they promote information exchange, they maintain harmony and they develop ways to cope with strategic and operational complexity (Kickert et al 1997; Agranoff and McGuire 2001).

Kickert and Koppenjan (1997) differentiate network managerial tasks according to three general activities: intervening in existing patterns of interaction and restructuring relationships, furthering the conditions for cooperation through consensus building, and joint problem solving. They argue that these strategies occur in the process of both game management and network structuring. Game management involves activating the network by deciding who should be involved and who not, arranging interaction, brokering to match problems and facilitating interaction. Network structuring involves influencing formal policy, influencing interrelationships, influencing values and perceptions and mobilizing coalitions.

Still, the categorization of network behaviors is less important than the point that it is necessary to determine how and why to use such behaviors. However one categorizes behaviors, the different management resources allocated by managers are nearly seamless in their applicability. This stems from the fact that multiple behaviors are utilized in network settings (McGuire 2002). Furthermore, such network skills are not that unique, as there are similarities with the skills required for managing single organizations (McGuire 2006).

In this paper we therefore rely on a framework developed by Robert Agranoff and Michael McGuire and based upon an extensive review of literature on network management and effectiveness. These management behaviors were organized into four distinct categories (activation, framing, mobilizing and synthesizing) and are relatively familiar to the operational categorization of Kickert, et.al. (1997) as outlined above.

Activation refers to a set of behaviors employed for identifying and incorporating the right persons and the resources they possess (such as finances, information, expertise, legal authority, etc.) on which the collaborative effort depends in order to attain its goals (Lipnack and Stamps 1994; McGuire 2006). One important criterion for determining who becomes involved in the collaboration may be that the member agencies offer resources that other agencies lack. Activation is a critical component of network management because resources such as money, information and expertise can be integrating mechanisms of networks (McGuire 2006).

Framing the interaction between network participants is defined as the set of behaviors used to arrange and integrate a network structure by facilitating agreement on participants' roles, operating rules and network values. Compared to activation, framing is perhaps a more subtle task. Network managers must arrange, stabilize, nurture and integrate the network structure (O'Toole 1997). Framing involves facilitating the internal structure and position of the participants as well as influencing the operating rules and norms of the network (Mandell 1990; Kickert and Koppenjan 1997). A manager can frame the network context by introducing new ideas and thereby creating a

shared purpose or vision (Lipnack and Stamps 1994; O'Toole 1997). In this regard managers might offer suggestions for looking at a problem differently. Managers can do this by facilitating agreement on leadership roles, helping to establish an identity and culture for the network, assisting in developing working structures and altering the perceptions of participants to understand the unique characteristics of working with persons in contexts without organizational mechanisms based in authority relations.

Mobilizing behavior is intended to induce commitment to the joint undertaking and to build support from both key players outside the collaboration and those who are directly involved (Innes and Booher 1999). Mobilization is an ongoing task for achieving network effectiveness. Managers build support by mobilizing organizations and coalitions and by forging an agreement on the role and the scope of network operations (Mandell 1990; Kickert, Klijn et al 1997). A manager must sell an idea to potential network participants to secure this commitment and support for the network (Gray 1989; Mandell 1990). Mobilizing requires a view of the strategic whole and an ability to develop and achieve a set of common objectives based on this whole (Mandell 1988).

By synthesizing the network managers create the environment and enhance the conditions for favorable, productive interaction among network participants. Managers must find a way to blend the various participants, each with conflicting goals or different perceptions or dissimilar values, to fulfill the strategic purpose of the network. The network manager must seek to achieve cooperation while preventing, minimizing or removing blockages. Important management behavior then includes facilitating and furthering interaction and linkages among participants (Kickert and Koppenjan 1997; O'Toole 1997) or reducing complexity and uncertainty by promoting information exchange among participants (Innes and Booher 1999; O'Toole 1988). These ties are created by establishing both formal communication channels and informal channels through face-to-face interaction, coordinating activities across organizations, and building relationships as a means to share knowledge and create trust (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004).

In this paper it will be hypothesized that local governments in Flanders, performing an imposed role as central agency within a network with private nonprofit suppliers, will make deliberate choices in order to allocate their managerial resources. These public agencies will have to fulfill, to some or lesser extent, a role in activating the right actors, in framing the interaction between network participants, in inducing sufficient levels of commitment and in creating a favorable environment for productive interaction.

Research questions and methodology

When considering the above arguments on networks, network effectiveness and its determinants, we will address four research questions in our empirical study:

1) Which are the network-level objectives that have been formulated by the different actors in the network?
2) To what extent are these network-level objectives realized in practice?
3) Which are the different categories of management behaviors through which the central agencies exert their steering role within the network?
4) To what extent do these categories of management behaviors contribute to the attainment of the network-level objectives?

In order to study these topics this paper argues that a mixed qualitative research strategy is the most appropriate approach (McNabb 2002). As service delivering networks could be considered as contemporary social phenomena our study is interpretative as it will help us to develop (subjective) meanings of these social events and actions. Next, our study will also have an explanatory value by looking for causal explanations of these social phenomena.

In concrete, a case study methodology is preferable to investigate such networks within their real-life context (Yin 2005). Cases will be selected upon both territorial and functional criteria. First, we delineate the scope of this research to the biggest cities in Flanders due to the fact that these are larger municipalities that have more resources and capacity to adequately fulfill a role in the creation and coordination of networks. On a functional level we are interested in the service delivering networks these local governments establish with private nonprofit suppliers that are active around two politically salient social issues in Flanders: child care and homelessness. In a first phase, a pilot will be conducted in one Flemish city (Kortrijk) in order to test the conceptualization and measurement of our key concepts. In a second phase the study will be extended to several other cities of comparable size as well.

We will primarily gather basic data about these networks and all public and private actors that could be considered as formal members of these networks. Furthermore, a guide will be developed for focused discussion in the field. The preliminary conceptual framework on networks, network effectiveness and its determinants, as it was already outlined in the previous chapters, will hereby serve as a good starting point (Agranoff 2007). After having pretested our guide, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with one representative per organization, which preferably perform a managerial function within their respective organization.

Discussion

This paper aimed at providing a framework to study whether network management, as performed by a central (public) agency, would be a key determinant in explaining the overall effectiveness of networks in which public and private actors interact for implementing public policies. This objective gains particular importance due to the worldwide emergence of network structures in order to solve so-called 'wicked issues' by jointly planning and providing publicly funded social services to citizens. More specifically, the above questions were put against the background of the debate on local social policy in Flanders. The recently launched Decree on local social policy hereby asks local governments to enhance cooperation with the private nonprofit suppliers through networks and to fulfill a coordinating role in steering network activities. Despite the provisional absence of empirical data we argue that this paper is able to make a twofold contribution. On the one hand we add some relevant insights to the debate on network effectiveness and its determinants. On the other hand we are able to shed a light on some practical implications for anyone targeting at empirically studying these networks.

About network effectiveness

First, scholars have repeatedly taken for granted that networks do have the ability to unlock the distinctive competencies of the different sectors involved in this collaborative effort (McGuire 2006). Still, as argued before, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the actual performance or effectiveness of these networks (Provan and Milward 2001; Christofoli, Turrini, et.al. 2009). This gap is partly due to the problems in conceptualization and measurement of effectiveness (Provan and Kenis 2007). Some recent studies have pointed out that collaborative structures between the public and the private nonprofit sector could also be unrelated to performance (Andrews and Entwistle 2010) or might even result in failures (Provan et.al. 2007). In a similar vein, Vangen and Huxham (2003) have referred to 'collaborative inertia' as participants in a collaborative endeavor might not agree on common aims, the amount of power is unequally distributed and the building of trust seems to more problematic than expected. In general terms, when studying networks, we must be aware of the fact that these structures do not always provide positive outcomes. The study presented in this paper might help to fill in this gap by assessing network effectiveness as the extent to which network-level objectives are realized in practice.

Second, we assessed effectiveness as the attainment of positive network-level outcomes that could not normally be achieved by individual organizational participants acting independently. Such criteria might for example include goal attainment, the productivity of the network, the quality of care, equity or the improved integration of critical services to vulnerable populations. Still, we agreed that

no certain outcome should be considered a priori as the correct one because each represents a potentially valid point of view (Kenis and Provan 2009). This raises questions about the extent to which the criteria through which respondents from both sectors in our study will assess the effectiveness of the network are similar, or not. Next, we must also determine whether or not differences do occur in the extent to which both sectors perceive these expected outcomes to be achieved.

A third conclusion related to the assessment of network effectiveness is that other levels of analysis could also be taken into consideration (Provan and Milward 2001). More specifically, we might refer to the outcomes at the client level (e.g. in terms of client well-being). Starting from this clients' perspective, further research could be conducted to determine the effects of the network activities, and network management in particular, on the extent to which citizens actually have improved access to social services. This argument gains particular importance in our case study due to the fact that according to the Decree on local social policy each citizen's right to have access to social welfare services must be interpreted in the most maximalist way. Or, in other words, while the overall effectiveness in reaching targeted objectives could be assessed in a positive (or negative) way, we must still wonder what this actually implies for clients and especially in terms of their social welfare rights.

About network management

In this paper we relied on a framework developed by Agranoff and McGuire (2003) to group the different management behaviors performed by the core agency within a network. As argued before, the categorization of network behaviors is perhaps less important than the need to determine how and why these behaviors are used in practice (McGuire 2002). This could make us wonder which managerial tasks are actually used by public agencies to coordinate network activities; whether some of these tasks are considered to be as more important than others and if differences hereby occur in the perceptions of the public and the private actors involved in the network. Public agencies could for example give priority to focus their attention on involving the right actors for the network (activation) or to induce sufficient levels of commitment (mobilizing), while network participants might prefer that the central agency increases its efforts for creating a favorable environment for interaction (synthesizing).

In a similar vein, there is the question if each category of managerial behavior does equally contribute to the perceived levels of attainment of network-level objectives. As shown in a recent study conducted by Klijn et.al. (2010) this might not always be the case. Through a quantitative analysis of environmental projects in the Netherlands these authors provided some insights into the

relationship between the type of management strategy (e.g. exploring content, connecting, arranging and process agreements) and both process and content outcomes. They found that different managerial strategies are important but that especially 'connecting', which is closely related to our categorization of synthesizing, could be seen as the most promising management strategy in realizing outcomes.

About the position of public agencies within the network

The central question raised here concerns the capacity of public agencies to fulfill a coordinating role in networks with private sector organizations. A study of the expansion of a harbor in the Netherlands revealed for example that governmental organizations may not be adequately prepared for the movement toward managing such networked arrangements (Teisman and Klijn 2002). The authors found that governments do not naturally exchange information or look for mutual solutions, as is required for effective collaboration. This capacity of public agencies to steer interactions with private organizations is a particular important issue in the context of our case as well. As outlined before, the Decree on local social policy spurs local governments to enhance cooperation with private nonprofit suppliers on their territory and to take up a tactical role in coordinating these network activities. Still, the Decree must rather be seen as a general framework as it does not impose 'hard' conditions to local governments or OCMWs about how to fulfill this role. This degree of autonomy must be interpreted as a way of providing local governments the possibility to respond to local needs. This paper argues, however, that this autonomy equally entails some problems that will hamper an effective coordination of network activities.

First, core agencies might have little levers (e.g. in financial or legal terms) at their disposal to actually induce commitment of private organizations or to make them adjust, at least partly, their activities and preferences to those of others. In Flanders, it might be expected that private nonprofit organizations will have low levels of commitment to these core local agencies. Despite, being active at this local level, they primarily focus at developing strong relationships with the regional Flemish government for their survival. In fact, from a historical perspective, it is the Flemish government that recognizes these organizations and is by far their most important funding source. This equally implies that local governments must find other ways to induce commitment of these private actors. This could be done by developing a strong and appealing vision on local social policy on their territory, by exploring potential advantages for organizations to be involved at the local level, by developing common aims and by stressing interdependence between organizations within and across policy fields. Second, governments do not only fulfill a steering role within networks, they might also operate as a provider of certain social services. As governments are both actor and referee within the

network, questions arise about how to objectively solve tensions or discussions among network participants. This has also been the case in Flanders. Starting from their legal mission to guarantee the social welfare of all citizens in the municipality, OCMWs organize their own facilities in for example elderly care, child care, or hospital care. This could result in lower levels of commitment of network members and in decreased capacity of the core agency to perform its steering role. In order to solve this dualist role governments might for example chose to contract out their service delivering tasks. Subsequently, the opportunity has also been raised for government to hire or set up a separate administrative agency to govern the network (Provan and Kenis 2007). This network administrative organization (NAO) is not another member organization providing its own services. Instead, this NAO is established, either through mandate or by the members themselves, for the exclusive purpose of network governance. Furthermore, Rethemeyer and Hatmaker (2007) raised the possibility that not only public agencies perform a steering role but that multiple network managers may exist within any given network. In a similar vein, it has also been stated that core agencies could also benefit from promoters or 'vision keepers', helping the core agency to implement its vision. These promoters are active at the working level where the links up and down have to be made. As actors who work with the programs on a daily basis, they have the technical knowledge to share with others. In this sense, these vision keepers promote the information and access to expertise within their agencies and help carry the work of the network (Agranoff 2003).

About the nature of networks

As outlined before, we rely on a definition of networks as a group of relatively autonomous actors, both public and private ones, who recognize that they are, to some or lesser extent, dependent upon each other's resources to tackle 'wicked issues' in which they have a common stake and to obtain results that they could have not achieved by working alone. Still, it has also been argued that not all networks are alike (Agranoff 2003). Inevitably, reality will be more complex than any bounded rational model. A study on the functioning and effectiveness of networks might therefore further enhance our comprehension on the nature of these networks. Of particular importance is to determine the extent to which network participants are actually interdependent and what kinds of interactions they develop. We hereby could refer to a distinction made between three types of networks (Brown and Keast 2003; Mandell et.al. 2004). First, there is the cooperative network that basically involves the mere sharing of information or expertise. There is very little, if any, risk involved in these kinds of transactions. Each participant remains totally independent and only interacts with others when necessary. Second, coordinative networks go one step beyond just exchanging information and/ or knowledge. Network members interact with each other in order to improve coordination of their individual efforts. They still remain independent entities, but are

willing to make changes at the margins in the way they deliver services. Third, there are collaborative networks that are only appropriate if there is a need for participants to come together to solve a complex problem that they recognize they cannot solve on their own. In such collaborative network the participants are all interdependent and must be willing to develop new ways of thinking, engaging in new types of relationships and willing to make changes in existing systems. This could provide us with a better insight in the extent to which such networks do actually operate within a notion of governance with less focus on hierarchical relationships and more on developing horizontal linkages.

About the importance of trust within networks

In the absence of a legal framework imposing hard conditions, it is commonly accepted that people join forces and work together because of the element of trust (Agranoff and McGuire 2001). Still, it is very difficult to determine whether trust exists a priori and to assess its effect on collaboration empirically (Brass, et.al. 2004). Short of stating that increased interaction and communication produce trust (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004), there is no general agreement about what a public manager can do to build it (Agranoff 2006). This makes the management of trust somewhat problematic (Entwistle and Martin 2005). In many aspects, trust is both an input and an output of the process of building relationships. It is understood as the ability of two or more parties to a relationship to rely upon informal solutions to deal with risk, and its associated costs, in any new venture. A relational approach allows these risks and costs to be shared, minimizing the danger to each party the relationship and also sharing benefits (Mackintosh 2000). Thus, trust is an input into relationship building in the sense that no ongoing relationship will survive without it. It is an output in the sense that working successfully together in a relationship reinforces trust between the parties involved. Vangen and Huxham (2003) argue that trust is built through a cyclical trust-building loop. When there is no history of prior ties, partners must be willing to take some risk in order to initiate the collaboration and aim for realistic goals. That is, the collaboration should first take small steps toward some modest level of achievement. Such success then reinforces attitudes that the parties to the collaboration can be trusted and leads to more ambitious undertakings. The lesson for the public manager is that trust takes time to develop and that it grows as the collaboration becomes successful.

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