

Article

# Balancing Relations and Results in Regional Networks of Public-Policy Implementation

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## Abstract

Regional networks have become popular routes for central governments to translate national ambitions into regional policies and actions; but these networks face challenges, having to balance between the dual objectives of obtaining short-term goals and establishing enduring network relations. This empirical article addresses the question as to whether there is any tension between these objectives, and if so, how can it be explained and managed. We report two studies on regional networks in the public-policy areas of Education and Employment in the Netherlands. Multiple methods were used: Interviews, surveys, archival records, social network data, and participatory observations. The findings suggest that this tension exists, and that it is especially found in young networks; more mature networks demonstrate better balance between network relations and goal attainment. Network governance was found to be a key explanatory factor whereby a network which had an administrative organization with a merely facilitative role, performed best in both respects.

Central governments are increasingly offering funds to regional actors to implement national policy. Those regional actors create a network for the centrally stipulated and funded goals and projects. Such regional, collaborative networks can be defined as nonprofit and/or for-profit organizational collaborations, to provide a public service (Isett et al. 2011). In some contexts, the networks are financially stimulated for a limited amount of time, after which they are expected to continue their services without the external financial aid. Although this stimulation is temporary, its desired effects are often long-term. Tension may arise within such networks, between the dual objectives of establishing enduring network relations and goal attainment (Human and Provan 2000; Currie and Suhomlinova 2006; Newman 2001).

This article reports two empirical studies addressing the question: what is the degree of tension, if any, whilst obtaining short-term results and establishing network relations and what factors may explain and affect this tension? The article sheds light on how to define network effectiveness and how this relates to the quality of relations in networks. Moreover, its findings

contribute to the emerging literature on network governance, by illustrating the effects of a Network Administrative Organization (NAO) on network effectiveness and relations (Provan and Kenis 2008). The effects depend on its specific role: either coordinating or a strongly leading role.

In this article, the theory section reviews the relevant literature using three core concepts: Network effectiveness, network relations, and network governance. After detailing our methods, we present two consecutive studies: One in-depth study on two initially extreme regional networks, aimed at developing propositions; and a second, larger study of 11 similar networks that tested these propositions. In the Discussion, we reflect on the findings and present a future research agenda.

## Theoretical Framework

### Network Effectiveness

Despite a vast amount of literature on networks, network effectiveness has received little attention (Provan, Fish and Sydow 2007; Vollenberg, Raab and Kenis 2007).

Empirical studies of network effectiveness typically examine the effectiveness of the participating organizations, rather than the effectiveness of the network as a whole. Studies with network effectiveness as the dependent variable stressed determinants of network effectiveness—such as network structure, coordination or management (Burt 2000; Klijn, Steijn and Edelenbos 2010; Lemaire and Provan 2009; Powell 1996; Provan and Sebastian 1998; Sorensen and Torfing 2009)—rather than measuring the effectiveness construct itself (Kenis and Provan 2009). One of the reasons why network effectiveness is hard to define is that it is context-dependent (Kenis and Provan 2009; Sydow and Windeler 1998). At its very basis, effectiveness refers to an answer to the question: Have the predetermined goals been realized? (2003; Conrad et al. 2003; Shortell et al. 2002; Turini et al. 2009; Weiss et al. 2002). In many networks, such goals do not exist beforehand, and they may differ from actor to actor, or may change over time. Even when there are pre-defined goals—as was in our research context—these may not fully reflect the actual effectiveness of the networks because many participants or stakeholders are involved, each with their own specific objectives and interests (Klijn 2007). Thus, network effectiveness may be in the eye of the beholder.

As some networks have a temporary, project-like character, the project literature offers an interesting view on this. Traditionally, project effectiveness was defined as meeting the qualifications regarding cost, time and quality (Oisen 1971). These effectiveness criteria, referred to as the “iron triangle,” have been the dominant definitions of project effectiveness. Over the last few decades, we have come to see that the failure of a project may have less to do with its formal results, but rather with the criteria used (Atkinson 1999; Cooke-Davies 2002; Shenhar et al. 2001). A famous example of a failure on paper, as the project largely exceeded time and budget whereas now seen as a success, is the Sydney Opera House: it became the city’s main tourist magnet (Shenhar et al. 2001). Since then, scholars have offered alternative ways to define project effectiveness. For example, Cooke-Davies (2002) distinguished between project management success, measured against the criteria of time, costs and quality; and project success, as perceived by relevant stakeholders.

Network effectiveness literature seems to have adopted this point of view. A frequently used approach when incorporating a stakeholder’s perspective on network effectiveness is to distinguish between network, organization, client, and community level effectiveness—or combinations thereof (Ferlie, Fitzgerald and Turini 2009; Klijn 2007; Provan and Milward 2001; Sydow and Windeler 1998; Turini et al. 2009). Depending on the specific research questions,

stakeholders may be defined as network members, funders, clients, or the general public. This present study focuses on the dynamics between establishing network relations among its members and realizing predetermined objectives. Therefore, network members’ perceptions of effectiveness are included, in addition to an objective measure of “realizing predetermined targets.”<sup>1</sup>

### Network Relations

The connection between network effectiveness and relations has been heavily debated among network scholars (Herranz 2010; Kenis and Provan 2009; McGuire 2006). An often stated criticism of network effectiveness studies is that effectiveness *indicators* are used as effectiveness *criteria*, compensating for the lack of more objective outcome criteria. Examples of effectiveness criteria are “soft” indicators such as trust and shared learning (Kenis and Provan 2009). The network can be (mistakenly) viewed as effective when participants are merely collaborating well (Herranz 2010; McGuire 2006). According to McGuire (2006, 39): “*Because collaboration is the new form of governance, it follows that collaboration in and of itself must be desirable. Thus, many studies, perhaps wrongly in some cases, equate the presence of collaboration with the success of a program without adequate empirical verification.*” Other scholars argue that traditional measures of effectiveness may not apply to networks (Mandell and Keast 2008) in which there is an emphasis on the need to build strong relationships and achieve intangible outcomes, such as trust and reciprocity; aspects that typically do not belong to the assessment of organizational effectiveness itself. Sydow and Windeler (1998) defined traditional *organizational* effectiveness in terms of achieving goals, productivity or profitability; they noted that *network* effectiveness must also take intangible aspects into account. On combining these two perspectives, network effectiveness consists of both “hard” (e.g., innovativeness, problem solving capacities of the results, robustness of results, and efficiency) and “soft” performance measures (e.g., trust, involvement/commitment of stakeholders, contact frequency, support for results, and absence of deadlocks or stagnation; Klijn, Steijn and Edelenbos 2010). In the empirical part of this article, we distinguish network effectiveness by focusing on network results and relations. The method section details the operationalizations.

1 Study 1 initially used an objective, quantitative measure for network effectiveness. During the interviews we learned that network members often questioned whether this single measure of goal attainment covered “how well” the network was functioning as a whole. Therefore, Study 2 included both an objective and a subjective measure of network effectiveness.

Regardless of whether network relations should be seen as a criterion or an indicator of network effectiveness, the concept of (quality of) network relations is valuable. Most literature on determinants of network effectiveness underlines the positive effect of relations on effectiveness. Determinants such as trust, reciprocity, cooperation, communication, information sharing, and commitment to the common purpose of the network are claimed to enhance the network's internal integration, which in turn is regarded as benefiting the overall network effectiveness (Agranoff and McGuire 2001; 2003; Conrad et al. 2003; Ferlie and Pettigrew 1996; Mitchell and Shortell 2000; Provan and Milward 2001; Provan and Sebastian 1998; Vangen and Huxham 2003). The assumption that high-quality collaboration is associated with high goal attainment is found particularly in literature on inter-organizational relations and policy networks. However, there is evidence that collaborative networks may be torn between obtaining short-term goals and establishing enduring network relations (Currie and Suhomlinova 2006; Human and Provan 2000; Newman 2001). Strong performance management may clash with, for example, network building and leadership (Currie, Grubnic and Hodges 2011). This triggers the question as to what role network governance may play in the presumed tension between network effectiveness and relations.

### Network Governance

Although networks are often defined as being horizontal (Alter and Hage 1993; Sørensen and Torfing 2009), they are, in practice, being steered to some degree. First, networks may be subject to strong external influencers. In the context of public-sector networks, the central government—which is not a regular member of regional networks—initiates the networks, shapes the frame and scope, and may affect network composition and membership. Consequentially, network goals and actions are bound by parameters set by central government and the central government looms continuously over the networks from the outside, hereby creating a “shadow of a hierarchy” (Currie et al. 2011; Scharpf 1997).

Second, within the networks themselves, there is often a form of leadership or governance present, as the networks may be too large or complex to be managed in a purely self-governed fashion. The three models of Provan and Kenis (2008) illuminate different types of network governance and leadership. They distinguish between shared-participant, lead-organization and NAO-governed networks. A network that is governed by organizational members is known as a *shared-participant* governed network. Such networks are typically dense, relatively small, and require high

trust levels and commitment among its members. In a *lead-organization* governed network, one of the members, for example, a large municipality, is responsible for coordinating the network. A NAO-governed network has an (often externally hired) administrator to coordinate the activities. In those instances where the NAO is an actor from within the network, he/she has been granted those coordinating and administrative tasks rather than being a representative of a single organization.

Network coordination through a central core agency/actor has been found to enhance network effectiveness (Conrad 2003; Jennings and Ewalt 1998; Provan and Milward 1995; Provan and Sebastian 1998), due to a higher level of control over the behaviors of network members and more efficient communication and decision-making processes. Crucial in this is that this central actor is trusted and its role is seen as legitimate by all network members. All three network types can be viewed as being ideal types: In practice, variations and combinations occur and the NAOs can adopt different roles. As will be illustrated in this study, their different roles have substantial effects on networks' functioning.

### Methods

Two successive studies were conducted. The first study aimed to explore effective network dynamics of two opposite cases, which enabled in-depth insights into network processes, governance, and outcomes. The second study examined whether the same findings would hold in a larger study with less extreme cases and searched for explanations for the counter-intuitive findings of Study 1. Note that the studies reported in this article are not social network analyses in the classical sense, but exploratory studies combining various qualitative and quantitative methods.

### Research Design and Sample Selection

#### Research Context

Study 1 consisted of two regional networks in the policy domain of lifelong learning (LLL). The Dutch government's aim was to upgrade the educational level of the Dutch working population, by encouraging adults to engage in “LLL” activities. To this end, it stimulated the emergence of regional networks, by funding these for a maximum of 4 years. After that period, they were expected to continue their services without financial aid from the central government. These networks were comprised of various public and private sector actors, including local governments, schools for vocational education, schools for higher education, and employers' associations. All the networks had similar objectives: To increase the number of (employed and

unemployed) adults. They made use of two LLL instruments: Work-Based Learning trajectories (WBL) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).<sup>2</sup>

#### Research Design

It is common practice in exploratory-type studies to examine extreme cases (Eisenhardt 1989; Pettigrew 1990). In the first study, two opposite regional networks were compared in a universe of in total 37 LLL networks: North, the lowest performing network, and South, the highest performing network. The main selection criterion was the extent to which the networks met their predetermined, quantitative targets. They were comparable in terms of regional size (the number of citizens) and network age (both had operated for 2 years).

In order to explore the findings of Study 1 in a broader context, a “cross case analytical” study (Barzelay et al. 2003) added three project types, each also concerned with education and employment: School Drop-outs (SDO), Youth Unemployment (YU), and Technology, Education and Employment (TEE).<sup>3</sup> Since we were particularly interested in whether Study 1’s findings would hold in a similar sample of non-extreme cases, the networks were not preselected based on performance levels. Eleven randomly selected regional networks within four regions (North, East, South, and West) were investigated. These regions, taken together, can be seen as representative of the Netherlands as a whole—which adds to the generalizability of the findings. Even though the sample of networks was drawn randomly, the regions were comparable in size.

#### Data Collection Processes

Both studies were mainly qualitative, supplemented with quantitative data (Jick 1979; Martinez et al. 2003; Sydow and Windeler 1998). In the first study, all network members were interviewed (i.e., 100% coverage). In the second study, the interviewees were selected, based on expert opinions, from key central governmental actors (Burt and Minor 1983; Scott 1991). Next, snowball sampling was used to include

more respondents (Goodman 1961). In total, 75 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted (table 1). The interviews with network members addressed a range of questions, including respondents’ definitions and perceptions of: network effectiveness, their perceptions of network relations, governance, developments and events since (and even before) the start of the network. The interviews with central government’s directors and policy officers were aimed at collecting relevant background information about the networks, including funding regulations, goals and targets, and relevant events.

A written survey was distributed in both studies, among the members of the networks. In the first study, 12 of the 16 sent questionnaires were returned. One hundred questionnaires were distributed (directly to the interviewees and via the network leaders) in Study 2, of which 37 were returned. After eliminating two incomplete questionnaires, 35 questionnaires were used; they detailed the dynamics of nine regional networks. The questionnaires were filled out by network members from various organizations: Schools (16), municipalities (9), employers (5), social-security providers (3), and regional platforms (2). In both studies, the survey response was rather limited; we will address this in the discussion section.

In both studies, archival official records on the networks’ goal attainment were also analyzed, including funding proposals and monitoring reports. These were provided by the central government, regional actors, and some were freely available on the Internet. These were primarily used for determining the level of goal attainment.

As the first study was largely exploratory, a wide range of methods were used: In addition to interviews, surveys, and archival data, two other types of datasets were obtained. Social network data were collected in order to reveal communication and power patterns. Also, two network meetings were attended and scrutinized in order to observe patterns of leadership and decision-making. These two additions were combined with the interview data and used to typify the network’s governance. The first study showed that interviews provide substantial and consistent information about network governance. Therefore, because we had broadened the research to 11 networks in Study 2, we narrowed down the number of methods and relied mainly on the interviews for determining governance type. Survey and archival data were also analyzed.

#### Measures

Both studies focused on three main network dynamics: goal attainment, network relations, and governance. In addition, the second study included the variable “perceived effectiveness,” and the following contextual

2 WBL means someone receives educational credits alongside a day job, which often takes place on the employee’s work floor. RPL is aimed at adults who have plenty of working experience, but few formal diplomas. Practical experience is then formalized, via a standardized procedure, into a certificate, which can be used to be exempted from formal education.

3 The purpose of the School drop-out project (SDO) was to reduce the number of pupils who leave school before they obtain their basic qualifications by 40%, within 4 years. The objective of Youth Unemployment (YU) was to slow the increase of youth unemployment rates—a result of the economic crisis—in the Netherlands. Technology in Education and Employment (TEE) aimed to increase the number of students and employees in the technical or technological sectors—where, despite the economic crisis, there were still shortages.

factors: network age, size, sector, and idiosyncratic regional context.

#### Goal Attainment

The variable “goal attainment” was defined as the extent to which networks met their predetermined, quantitative targets. The data came from archival records. In the first study, these measures were the percentage of RPL- and WBL-targets realized. The second study concerned four different types of networks, each with its own type of targets. As a result, we had to look for ways to compare the projects: We compared the goal attainment of each network to the Dutch national average performance of that particular project. Networks performing at the Dutch national average were given a score “3.” Those performing within the top 20% of highest performing networks received a “5,” those performing at the bottom 20% were given a “1,” and so forth.

#### Perceived Effectiveness

Goal attainment is not always seen as the single objective of each network. Hence, we developed a measure for perceived network effectiveness, to complement the earlier used objective measure of goal attainment. This new survey measure was based on theoretical indicators of network effectiveness, as well as on interview data from the first study (top [table 2](#)). Factor analysis showed that the 11 items (answered on a 5-point Likert scale) formed a single factor: perceived network effectiveness (Cronbach’s alpha .91).

#### Network Relations

To measure the perceived quality of network relations in the first study, an eight item survey was used, adapted from [Chatman and Flynn \(2001\)](#), with a 5-point Likert scale. Example items are: “There is a high level of cooperation between network members,” and “I trust the other network members to do as

**Table 1.** Number and Type of Interviewees Across the Two Studies

	Regional Network Actors	Central Governmental Informants	Total
<b>Study 1</b>	16	4	20
<i>Per region</i>	<i>North: 10 South: 6</i>		
<b>Study 2</b>	39	16	55
<i>Per region</i>	<i>North: 7 East: 14 South: 9 West: 9</i>		
<b>Total</b>			75

**Table 2.** Questionnaire Items Measuring Perceived Effectiveness and Network Relations

Perceived Effectiveness	# Items	Exemplar Items <sup>a</sup>	Sources
Overall	1	Overall I feel that this network is effective	<a href="#">McGuire and Silvia 2009</a>
Organization level effectiveness	3	This network has added value for my organization; This network has added value for my clients	<a href="#">Klijn 2007</a> ; <a href="#">Provan and Milward 2001</a> ; Study 1
Network level effectiveness—current	5	We succeed at realizing predetermined targets; The actions of our organizations are well aligned; We succeed at taking joint actions	<a href="#">Provan and Milward 2001</a> ; Study 1
Network level effectiveness—future	2	I expect that we will continue the measures and services after the funding ends; I expect that these measures will continue to be effective	<a href="#">Klijn, Steijn and Edelenbos 2010</a> ; <a href="#">Provan and Milward 2001</a> ; Study 1
Network relations			
Trust	4	Partners generally live up to their agreements; Partners are generally honest to each other; Partners do not take advantage of each other; Partners often do more than strictly necessary	<a href="#">Mayer 1995</a> ; <a href="#">McEvily and Zaheer 2006</a> ; <a href="#">Rousseau 1998</a> ; <a href="#">Sako 1998</a>
Organizational commitment	2	My organization is willing to invest time and money in this network; My organization is willing to align operational actions in accordance with decisions made in the network	<a href="#">Allen and Meyer 1990</a>
Individual commitment	2	This project’s objective matters a great deal to me; I’m willing to make an effort beyond what is expected of me	<a href="#">Allen and Meyer 1990</a>
Communication	2	Meetings are held frequently; I frequently meet or contact my fellow network members outside of the formal meetings	<a href="#">Klijn, Steijn and Edelenbos 2010</a>

Note: <sup>a</sup>Translated from Dutch.

promised.” We asked how the two networks had developed over their 2 years of operation. Current and retrospective data were collected by asking respondents to answer each of the eight questions twice: for the first year (Cronbach’s alpha .95), and for the second year (Cronbach’s alpha .94).

We expanded this measure in Study 2 by including items on communication and frequency of contact, as social network data was not collected in this study. The resulting survey consisted of 10 items that were derived from the literature on inter-organizational and network relations (bottom [table 2](#)). Factor analysis revealed that “network relations” consisted of two distinct factors: (1) Inter-personal relations (Cronbach’s alpha .81), which consisted of six items on individual commitment and frequency of contact, and (2) Inter-organizational relations (Cronbach’s alpha .75), incorporating four items on organizational commitment and trust (Supplementary Appendix I).

#### Network Governance

Using [Provan and Kenis’ \(2008\)](#) ideal types, Study 1 collected social network, observational, and interview data to assess network governance; Study 2 collected interview data. Social network data were collected from the complete list of network members; respondents were asked to indicate, on a 4-point scale, (1) how often they interacted with each member and, (2) how much influence they thought each member had on decision-making processes. We then used UCINET to calculate the networks’ overall density (i.e., the sum of all direct ties, divided by the maximum possible number of direct ties), as well as their in-degree centrality (i.e., an indication of how central an organization is within the network, based on the perception of the other network members; [Borgatti, Everett and Freeman 2002](#)). Visone ([Brandes and Wagner 2004](#)) was used in order to arrive at [figure 1](#). The observational data were collected by attending a randomly selected network meeting in each region, during which the main author took notes and observed intergroup behavior. Such observations included who chaired the meetings and who was most actively involved in decision-making. The interview data elicited recollections of the inception of the networks (e.g., who took the initiative), how they are currently governed (e.g., who organizes and chairs the meetings), and what developments had occurred.

#### Additional Predictive and Control Variables

In Study 2, several additional, archival-based variables were included: (1) Network age (i.e., number of years in existence), (2) Network size (i.e., the number of participating organizations), (3) Sector (i.e., “public”

or “multi-sectoral”), and (4) Idiosyncratic regional context.<sup>4</sup>

#### Process of Data Analysis

##### Interview Data

The 75 interviews took 75 min, on average, were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted, coded, and analyzed by the main author and two advanced MSc students, using the QSR NVivo 8.0 software package. Prior to the coding process, a set of fairly global categories based on the theory and the interview questions was developed ([Popping 2015](#)). We commenced with reading and rereading the transcribed interviews in full, so as to grasp the key themes. The interview data were analyzed by forming codes and sub codes via an inductive approach ([Goetz and LeCompte 1981](#); [Patton 2002](#); [Popping 2015](#)), and these were assigned to the main categories ([table 3](#)). The categories and codes were fine-tuned, extended and revised during the coding process ([Goetz and LeCompte 1981](#); [Patton 2002](#); [Popping 2015](#)).

Next, the sub codes were carefully analyzed, and the networks were compared case-by-case. Through this process, patterns emerged within each case and across cases. For example, four overall types of network governance emerged: Shared-participant, lead-organization, coordinating-NAO, and leading-NAO. Also, four overall phases of events were identified: The situation prior to the start of the network, network formation, implementation of measures, and evaluation and adaptation. Quotes that are representative of an interesting pattern or relation are included in the results section, in order to illustrate the insights.

##### Survey Data

To test proposition 1, we explored whether the dependent variables (goal attainment, perceived effectiveness, inter-personal, and inter-organizational relations) are at odds with each other. The mean scores of the 11 networks were compared, as well as the correlations of all the dependent, predictive and control variables ([table 5](#) shows the main descriptive statistics and correlation matrix with related *p* values for significance tests of the quantitative variables). The results show that goal attainment and inter-personal

4 A region’s context was assessed with four criteria: Unemployment rates; youth unemployment rates; educational levels; and school drop-out rates prior to the start of the networks. These data were collected from various official archival records and were compared to the national Dutch average. Each region received a score from 1 to 5: “1” indicated that the region was in a highly disadvantageous position compared to the national Dutch average, and a “5” indicated that a region was in a comparatively highly advantageous position. A “3” meant that a region’s context was similar to the national Dutch average, et cetera. Scores were given independently by both the main author and two MSc students, and then discussed and concluded afterwards.

South (Density: 45%)

North (Density: 70%)

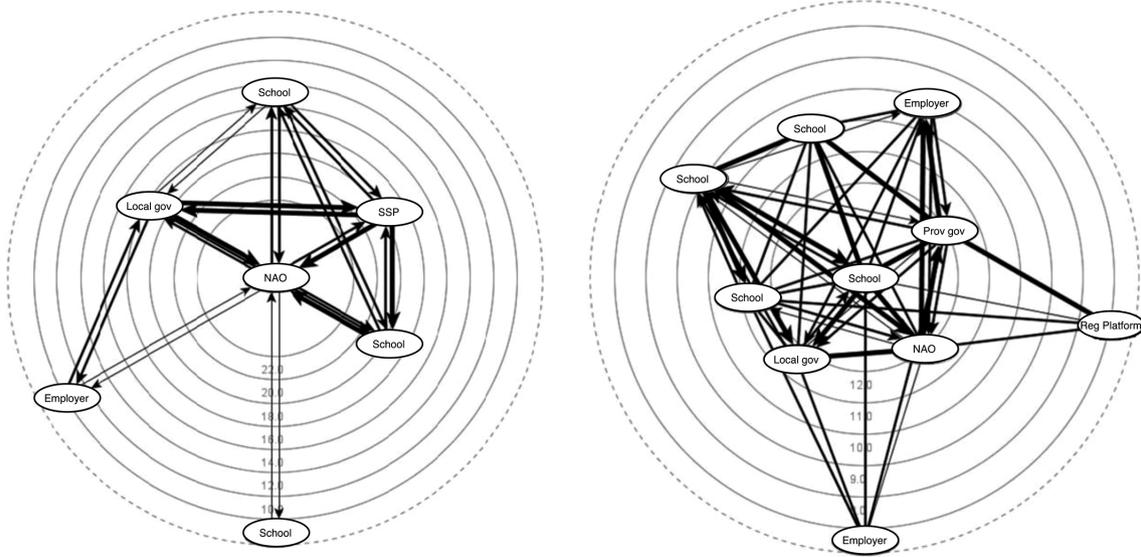


Figure 1. Visualization of Two Regional Lifelong Learning Networks

Table 3. Categories and Exemplar Codes and Sub Codes From Interviews

Category	Exemplar Codes	Exemplar Sub Codes
Historical context	Prior related activities Prior relations	<i>New interventions; strengthening existing interventions Feuds from past; competition; high trust; neutral/no trust; distrust (prior)</i>
Regional context	Regional context	<i>Economic situation; population; unemployment rates/drop-out rates before start Strong regional tradition; mainly local orientation</i>
Development	Start of the network Changes/events	<i>Initiative; incentive/urgency Change of project leader; change of participants; granted funding; denied funding; monitoring</i>
Network governance	Network organization Formal/informal network leadership Governance type  Decision-making process	<i>Network formation; implementation; evaluation and adaptation Steering group; working groups Internal; external; none; shared; appointed; emerged Shared-participant; lead-organization; coordinating-NAO; leading-NAO Dominant actors; equal distribution of influence; roles and tasks of network leader</i>
Effectiveness	Type of measures developed Organization of measures Realization of targets Quality of measures Expected endurance	<i>Coaches; one-stop-shop; client-follow-up system Collective actions; execution in individual organization Satisfaction with results; client satisfaction Probability of continuation of network relations; of activities/measures</i>
Network relations	Communication Trust Commitment	<i>Frequency; quality/satisfaction High trust; neutral/no trust; distrust (current) Relevance to individual; relevance to organization; urgency for the region as a whole</i>

relations had a significant negative correlation. Thus, the difference between goal attainment (or results) and inter-personal relations was calculated to operationalize “tension”. Two different multiple regression models were

tested for proposition 2 with the dependent variable “tension” (Cohen et al. 2013). Model I only includes the control variables (size, sector, and regional context); Model II includes network age.

A series of regression analyses were conducted for each of the dependent variables in Study's 1 resulting propositions 3 and 4: Goal attainment, perceived effectiveness, inter-personal and inter-organizational relations. Model III only included the three control variables. Model IV, which tested proposition 3, transformed the nominal data on governance types into a binary dataset: "centralized" (lead-organization and "leading-NAO" networks) and "decentralized" networks (shared-participant and "coordinating-NAO" networks). Model V lists the result of testing proposition 4. Three dummy variables were formed for the four types of governance networks; the shared-participant network was chosen as the referent variable.

### Findings Study 1

Central governments often translate national ambitions into regional policies and actions, including the formation and maintenance of effective regional networks. In the below, we first report the findings on two such networks concerned with the newly decentralized policy issue of LLL. Both networks' results were extreme in the sense that, compared to the other LLL networks in the country, one (South) had the highest output, whereas the other (North) had the lowest. We derived four propositions from both cases and examined them, in Study 2, in 11 different, less extreme regional networks concerned with four policy issues: LLL, SDO, YU, and TEE.

In Study 1, both the interview and survey data showed that network collaboration was particularly troublesome in the highly performing network in South, whereas North had built quite solid inter-organizational relations (table 4). To give possible explanations for these patterns, we first need to take a close look at the compositions and contexts of both networks, after which we will analyze their development.

#### Characteristics of the Two Networks

The two studied networks had similar objectives, but were different in terms of their composition: Their actors, the interrelations between the actors, their types of governance, and their historical contexts that affected these governance types.

#### Network Actors and Their Interrelations

North was comprised of 10 organizations. Several of them had a direct gain from the network, including four schools (two of which were competitors), a local government, a social-security agency, and two employers' associations. The schools' primary objective was to "sell" LLL instruments to employers, which makes it a market-like relationship. The local government and social-security agency were responsible for the physical service center. The provincial governmental agency and a public-sector economic regional platform did not gain directly other than "wanting to see the region do well economically" and acted more or less as neutral mediators.

South consisted of seven organizations: three schools (none of which were competitors), a local government, a social-security agency, an employers' association, and an agency specialized in providing RPLs to employed adults. The latter organization was interesting, as it took on a highly central role in the network, as we will illustrate in the next paragraph. Note that the municipal and provincial governmental actors in both networks were regular network members without legislative or funding authority in this context.

#### The Emergence of Network Governance

The director of the agency in South that provided RPLs had a dominant role in the network. The agency came about due to a collaboration between the three schools, a few years before the central government's LLL project commenced, and grew into an independent organization with its own director and board. When the national LLL project started and regional networks had to be formed, this agency's director took on the task of coordinating the network. Pushed by the desire to gain rapid results, the agency began to compete with the schools to sell RPLs, leading to tension between the agency and the schools. In sum, South can be described as a centralized network with a strong NAO that not only coordinated the network, but also made most decisions. It was even largely responsible for their execution—acting more or less as a hierarchical

**Table 4.** Network Performance of Two Networks, Across 2 Years

	First Year		Second Year	
	North	South	North	South
Goal attainment: Work-based Learning (WBL) <sup>a</sup>	77%	307%	88%	165%
Goal attainment: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) <sup>a</sup>	62%	140%	72%	83%
Relations <sup>b</sup>	3.7	2.4	3.9	2.9

Note: <sup>a</sup>As a percentage of the targets (based on archival data).

<sup>b</sup>Mean score on a reliable 5-point scale (based on eight items in a survey).

leader. The central role of the NAO in South is depicted in [figure 1](#).<sup>5</sup>

No such agency existed in North. The network actors, who knew each other from previous projects, had decided earlier on to develop and execute the activities collectively. In terms of governance, North can be described as a NAO-governed network. In this case, the NAO was someone embedded in a social-security agency. This agency had two individuals acting in the network: One representing the organization, and one who was given a coordinating role. The latter's salary was paid by all the other organizations collectively, where her role was a neutral, trustworthy coordinator. This network is visualized as a decentralized network, with multiple actors in the network's core: two vocational schools, the local government, the NAO, and the provincial government ([figure 1](#)).

#### An Extreme-case Analysis

In addition to the historical and governance contexts of the two networks, we specify three of their developmental phases: (1) network formation, (2) implementation, and (3) evaluation and adaptation. Of course, these three phases are a simplification of the genuine development that networks go through, but for the purpose of recognizing patterns, this distinction identifies the differences between the two networks' life span.

#### Network Formation Phase

In order to gain the funding for the LLL project, South's RPL-agency had to broaden its focus substantially, by (1) including job seekers as a target group (in addition to those already employed), (2) going beyond the industrial sector, and (3) incorporating WBL as an addition LLL instrument. Intensive collaboration with other partners, such as the local government and a social-security agency, was necessary for success. However, although the network members in South had committed to the network (by signing a covenant with the Ministry), the RPL-agency continued, in practice, its routine activity. Little effort was put into building inter-organizational relations and the leading NAO went straight into implementation mode.

Conversely, North pursued network formation more seriously and took considerably longer than South. This was partly due to North having more network members than South, including several (competing) schools, which increased the need for a more delicate and collaborative process, and partly because all LLL

activities had to be built from scratch. Thanks to a number of individual school representatives who got along well and trusted each other, the North network was eventually able to make consensus-based agreements and establish good relations among the network actors, including all the schools ([table 4](#)). The North network members felt that inter-personal trust among the schools' representatives compensated for an initial lack of institutional trust between the organizations.

#### Implementation Phase

South rapidly gained an advantage during its first year: By realizing over 200% of its targets. This was partly due to luck, as several large firms in the region bought many RPLs for their employees, thereby boosting the realization of the network's initial targets. Also, the RPL-agency pushed hard to achieve the set targets. However, in order to do so, it took on many tasks that traditionally belonged to schools (e.g., the intake and testing of candidates), causing friction between the schools and the RPL-agency. Its focus on operational tasks left the agency little time to build strategic relationships with other network members. Local governments, the social-security provider, and the schools felt the distance; they did not see themselves as an equal network partner, but rather as in a vendor-customer type of relationship.

North's numerical results lagged behind. A reason was the aforementioned focus on establishing inter-organizational relations, which meant it took quite a long time before the consensus-based decisions reached the implementation phase. An example of North's cooperative approach during implementation was that all partners contributed equally; each placing one of their employees in a front office for LLL clients. In comparison, although South had a similar front office, it was staffed by a single, externally hired employee.

#### Evaluation and Adaptation Phase

At the start of the second project year, the networks were evaluated by the central government. South was refunded, but the government decided that the municipality should become more involved in the network, and ordered its alderman to take a seat on the RPL-agency's board of directors. A second intervention was that the director of the RPL-agency was replaced. The new director delegated many of the operational tasks to schools and other network members, and focused on improving inter-organizational relations and commitment.

North's funding request was denied by central government at the beginning of the second year. Their request had been written by an external advisor, and after that initial rejection the network members decided to write a fresh proposal. To this end, four

5 The two networks' visualizations, based on the interaction frequency, were very similar to the visualizations based on the criterion influence in decision-making. The latter two are, therefore, not presented in this article.

representatives of the entire network locked themselves in a hotel for a few days. According to the participants of this high-pressure team, they also learned much in that process about each other's objectives, organizational values and perspectives. That better level of understanding made them think of issues from a group perspective. The joint strategic writing had a positive effect on both the quality of the proposal, their collaboration and their commitment toward the proposal—which got refunded.

### Propositions

South's first year was characterized by strong results, but its rapid commencement was associated with network difficulties that threatened its continuity. North's network building efforts led to unmet targets at the end of the first year. It seems, therefore, that investing in the realization of quantitative targets can take time away from building good, trust-based relations among network partners. Similarly, investing time and energy in establishing inter-organizational relations may take time away from gaining quick visible wins. We postulate therefore that:

P1A. High goal attainment may be obtained at the expense of building network relations.

P1B. Network relations may be obtained at the expense of attaining goals.

In the second year, South still performed better than North, in terms of attaining its quantitative targets, whereas North still scored higher than South on cooperation satisfaction. However, the differences between the two networks became less extreme. The two networks became more alike and started to perform well in both respects. These findings led to the proposition that network relations and goal attainment may be at odds with each other only in the early life of a network. The second proposition is therefore:

P2. As networks mature, the tension between goal attainment and establishing high-quality network relations may diminish.

Of course, 2 or 3 years is a relatively short timeframe. However, since these networks received funding on a year-to-year basis, with a maximum of 4 years, it was a real and relevant timeframe for them: The networks had to perform well and prepare for continuance in the next period. In their in-depth study of two inter-organizational networks, [Human and Provan \(2000\)](#) found a similar pattern, in the sense that the network that appeared to be most successful in the early stages of its existence, experienced most difficulties in its perceived legitimacy, relations, commitment and trust later on—eventually leading to its demise.

The network literature suggests that in order for a shared-participant network to implement and attain its decisions, while simultaneously keeping members involved and committed, requires a high level of cooperation and communication ([Provan and Kenis 2008](#)). Networks led by a single leading actor may be more efficient and effective, in the short run, because implementation can start sooner due to shorter decision-making and discussion time ([Provan and Milward 1995](#); [Vollenberg, Raab and Kenis 2007](#)). This led to the postulation:

P3. Decentralized networks have high-quality network relations, but low levels of goal attainment. Centralized networks have high goal attainment, but low-quality network relations.

Considering the specific role of the NAO in South, who took on many of the decision-making tasks and executions, in contrast to the more facilitating NAO in North, we provide an alternative proposition:

P4. Network Administrative Organizations with a coordinating role foster high-quality network relations. NAOs with a leading role stimulate goal attainment. Although we were unable to ascertain in Study 1 precisely how contextual factors, such as the regional economic situations, affected the variance, the various data sources provided consistent evidence, corroborating the insight that both network age and type of governance may explain the patterns found. A larger study was conducted in order to explore the contextual factors further.

## Findings Study 2

### Results Versus Relations?

The case-by-case analysis of the interview data showed that two of the 11 networks were lagging behind even though their relations were reportedly good, whereas in another network, the results were high, but the relations were described as troublesome or poorly developed. Thus, there was a noticeable discrepancy in 3 of the 11 networks, between the network relations and the perceived effectiveness. Some respondents spontaneously mentioned that; in their view, a strong focus on realizing targets collided with collaboration or long-term results.

“The aim of region West, to establish a sustainable infrastructure for lifelong learning, is – in my view – at odds with realizing targets quickly.”  
[School representative in West]

“Quantitative targets can have a negative effect when people do not invest in culture and lack a

long-term vision. Targets must be realized now: since that is what the network gets paid for.”  
[School representative in East]

A correlation analysis showed that goal attainment correlated negatively with inter-personal relations ( $r = -.36, p < .05$ ; table 5). Goal attainment and inter-organizational relations had a non-significant negative correlation. Therefore, propositions 1A and 1B are partially supported: In network-settings, high goal attainment may be obtained at the expense of building high-quality inter-personal relations; and high-quality inter-personal relations may be built at the expense of attaining goals. When network effectiveness is defined from the stakeholders' perspectives, the correlations between perceived effectiveness and inter-personal ( $r = .44, p < .01$ ) and inter-organizational relations ( $r = .68, p < .001$ ) are positive. An explanation for these findings is that the perceived effectiveness measure did not merely focus on the targets “here and now”, but incorporated future expectations, which require adequate relationships.

Relevant to note is the lack of significant relations between the objective measure of goal attainment and the subjective measure of perceived effectiveness (table 5). A paired sample *t*-test shows a significant difference in goal attainment ( $M = 2.85, SD = 1.03$ ) and perceived effectiveness scores ( $M = 3.45, SD = .71$ ;  $t(34) = -2.84, p = .008$ ). A case-by-case comparison of the objective and subjective data further illustrated that perceived effectiveness was relatively high compared to goal attainment in the North and South networks. Conversely, perceived effectiveness in the relatively strong performing East region appeared to be underestimated. In West, both variables were equally high. Studies on organizational and managerial performance have shown that individuals' perceptions

often overestimate the level of performance (Bazerman 2005; Meier and O'Toole 2012). An explanation for such a presumed “false positive” may be that network actors value other indicators more when objective results are lacking; conversely, actors who are confident about the actual output dare to be more critical about other effectiveness indicators.

#### Network Age

Proposition 2 states that as networks mature, the tension between high goal attainment and high-quality network relations diminishes. Therefore, six 1-year-old networks were compared to five 2-year-old ones. The difference between 1-year- and 2-year-old networks is small and may seem insignificant, but it is relevant in this particular context. The networks were funded per year; they had to re-apply for their continuance. The funding regulations created a “pressure cooker-effect,” which meant that processes which would normally take a few years to develop, were sped up. Overall, goal attainment was higher in first-year than in second-year networks. Interview accounts of what was going on in the networks showed this was due to “easy pickings,” an effect that is often found in social studies. For example, during the first year, the SDO-networks were largely involved in bringing recently dropped-out youths back into the school system, which was relatively easy and required little extensive collaboration. In subsequent years, the collaborative effort had to be extended so as to identify and redirect the more persistent school-avoiding youths.

In order to assess proposition 2, the tension between goal attainment and inter-personal relations was calculated and treated as the dependent variable. The first multiple regression model showed that the control variables explained little variance in tension (Adjusted

**Table 5.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for the Dependent, Predictive, and Control Variables

	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Goal attainment	2.92	1.04								
2. Perceived effectiveness	3.45	0.09	0.03							
3. Inter-personal relations	3.81	0.64	-0.36*	0.44**						
4. Inter-organizational relations	3.49	0.59	-0.18	0.68**	0.50**					
5. Age	0.60	0.50	-0.22	0.45**	0.23	0.34				
6. Type of network governance	2.60	1.06	-0.57**	0.36*	0.37*	0.49*	0.64**			
7. Size	0.29	0.46	-0.02	-0.10	-0.25	-0.23	0.00	-0.42*		
8. Sector	0.54	0.51	0.52**	-0.40*	-0.41*	-0.40*	-0.75**	-0.79**	0.45**	
9. Regional context	0.11	0.32	0.37*	0.16	0.09	0.01	0.11	-0.29	-0.23	-0.21

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

$R^2 = 20\%$ ,  $F(4.32) = 3.707$ ,  $p < .05$ ; table 6). When age was included, as done in Model II, the explanatory power rose to 36.7% ( $F(4.32) = 5.645$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The results support the proposition that older networks experience less tension between realizing goals and establishing inter-personal relations, compared to younger ones.

No significant effects were found for the possible tension between results and inter-organizational relations. Thus, the following refined proposition 2 received support: The tension between obtaining high goal attainment and establishing inter-personal relations diminishes as networks mature. This can be explained by the fact that no extensive collaboration is required in networks' "easy pickings" phase, where people can be fairly successful while acting independently. The more complex networks require intensive collaboration. Consequently, more needs to be invested in the links between members, resulting in reduced tension between results and relations.

#### Centralized Versus Decentralized Networks

In order to address proposition 3, about the effect of centralization, regression models were ran with four dependent variables: goal attainment, perceived effectiveness, inter-personal and inter-organizational relations. Significant models were found for goal attainment. This means that network centralization may not affect network relations or stakeholder perceptions of network effectiveness.

Model III shows the effect of the control variables on goal attainment (table 7). The control variables explained a lot of the variance (Adjusted  $R^2 = 50.9\%$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Multi-sectoral networks were associated with higher goal attainment than were public networks. Also, in a region with better than average circumstances goal attainment was higher compared to less fortunate regions. On adding the centralization variable, the explanatory power increased slightly, to 53.9%, but centralization was not significant. We

**Table 6.** Regression Results of Network Age on the Tension Between Goal Attainment and Inter-Personal Relations

	Model I	Model II
Network sector	-0.41	-1.33**
Network size	0.52	0.99**
Regional context	-1.01*	-0.97**
Network age		-1.01**
Constant	1.01**	1.98**
F-stat	3.72*	5.65**
Adjusted $R^2$	20.2%	36.7%

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

therefore find no statistical support for the proposition that the level of centralization affects goal attainment.

#### Governance and the Role of a NAO

Proposition 4 is an alternative to proposition 3. It postulates that network effectiveness and relations are affected by the specific type of governance, by taking the precise role of the NAO into account. A recurring pattern was noted in the qualitative interview data: NAO-governed networks either did far better or worse compared to the lead-organization and shared-participant governed networks. The crucial factor appeared to be: The precise role of the NAO. Network members in regions where the NAO had only a coordination role (leaving decision-making to the actual network members) felt more ownership, interacted more actively with one another, and seemed more strongly committed to the objectives and tasks at hand. In East, for example, a NAO was responsible for coordinating three distinct networks (YU, TEE, and LLL), and this was frequently noted as an important factor for success. In West, an independent agency coordinated the SDO-network, to the satisfaction of the other network members.

"There are many employment-related initiatives in [East]. Luckily, we have a good structure here where many of these networks come together. [Name inter-municipal agency] employs the network leaders who coordinate the network and chair meetings, et cetera. As we literally share a hallway, we [the network leaders of the LLL, YU and TEE networks] are able to connect our overlapping project goals and see how we can help one another." [Network leader, East]

"Collaborating with other schools and municipalities is not always easy. [...] It helps a lot that [name NAO] acts as a mediator to make sure we

**Table 7.** Regression Results of Network Centralization and Network Governance on Goal Attainment

	Model III	Model IV	Model V
Network sector	1.37**	1.42**	1.31**
Network size	-0.50	-0.45	-0.09
Regional context	1.39**	1.45**	1.64**
Centralization		0.49	
<i>Leading-NAO</i> ( <i>ref = shared-participant</i> )			-1.15*
<i>Coordinating-NAO</i> <i>Lead-organization</i>			0.43 0.89**
Constant	2.27**	1.83**	2.01**
F-stat	12.72**	10.94**	24.38**
Adjusted $R^2$	50.9%	53.9%	80.5%

Note: The variables placed in italics are dummy variables. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

meet on a regular basis to make decisions, and also checks whether we all do the agreed tasks.” [Vocational school, West]

In contrast, instances were found in other networks where a NAO acted as the leader. In the YU network in South, the central government pulled the over-active NAO out of the project after the first year (which was similar to what had happened in the LLL case in Study 1).

“The external agency that managed the network slowly took over. More and more externals were shipped in and as they did most of the necessary work, the network partners became less involved. After a while, the results were poor and the central government decided to intervene. I was then asked to become project leader, also as an external actor, but with the explicit instruction to coordinate and stimulate rather than to make decisions.” [Network leader, South]

A case-by-case comparison of the networks shows that both coordinating-NAO networks and lead-organization networks did relatively well at realizing goals and establishing network relations simultaneously (table 8). Shared-participant networks scored low on goal attainment, but had solid inter-organizational relations, which is similar to what was found in Study 1. In contrast to Study 1, however, leading-NAO networks underperformed in both respects.

Model V in table 7 offers the results after examining proposition 4. On comparing it to Model III, which only had control variables, the explanatory power rose to 80.5% ( $p < .001$ ) when the type of governance was included. Leading-NAO networks and shared-participant networks scored lowest on goal attainment, whereas lead-organization networks and networks with coordinating-NAOs scored the highest ( $F(6.34) = 24.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Network governance only affected goal attainment; no significant statistical effects were established for perceived effectiveness and network relations.

An interesting side-effect was found for the control variable, network sector. Multi-sectoral networks

did better in terms of goal attainment ( $F(1.34) = 11.9$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereas the public ones performed better in inter-personal ( $F(1.32) = 6.3$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and inter-organizational relations ( $F(1.32) = 6.0$ ,  $p < .05$ ), as well as perceived effectiveness ( $F(1.32) = 5.8$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This is intriguing, as scholars have often assumed that multi-sectoral collaboration is more effective, since the knowledge and resources of several sectors are combined (Gazley and Brudney 2007; Selsky and Parker 2005). However, multi-sectoral collaboration can be less effective when there is tension between institutional logics (Andrews and Entwisle 2010; Herranz 2008). The present findings suggest that collaboration is easier among public actors, whereas private actors may propel multi-sectoral networks to attain their goals.

## Discussion

### Summary and Contributions

Although “good networking” is frequently assumed to be associated with “good results,” we show that both phenomena may develop in non-linear ways. This insight supports other studies on collaborative networks; they showed that a strong focus on results may come at the expense of developing network relationships (e.g., Currie and Suhomlinova 2006; Human and Provan 2000). We illustrate in our research how focusing on good relations may undermine achieving results—at least in the short run: The tension between results and relations tends to decrease over time. At first sight, this might suggest that it hardly matters how members behave. Networks’ poor results can be improved in the future, whereas troubled relations in a network are less easily repairable. This implies a network’s ability to achieve good results by investing in network relations may well be a higher priority than a focus on short-term results.

Network centralization is not found to be related to goal attainment. This may seem contrary to the Provan and Milward (1995) finding, that centralization through a core agency is associated with higher network effectiveness. Our results offer a specification of their pattern: Centralization is associated with higher

**Table 8.** Descriptive Statistics of Network Effectiveness and Relations per Governance Type

Type of Governance	N	Goal Attainment Mean (SD)	Perceived Effectiveness Mean (SD)	Inter-Personal Relations Mean (SD)	Inter-Organizational Relations Mean (SD)
Coordinating-NAO	17	3.76 (0.56)	3.40 (0.69)	3.61 (0.59)	3.36 (0.53)
Lead-organization	3	3.33 (0.58)	3.75 (0.49)	3.75 (0.35)	3.83 (0.00)
Leading-NAO	4	2.50 (1.00)	2.75 (1.13)	3.50 (0.90)	2.78 (0.63)
Shared-participant	11	2.00 (0.00)	3.74 (0.49)	4.10 (0.62)	3.72 (0.55)
<b>Total/mean</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>3.03 (0.95)</b>	<b>3.47 (0.70)</b>	<b>3.77 (0.64)</b>	<b>3.45 (0.58)</b>

effectiveness (i.e., goal attainment) when a lead-organization runs the network. However, when a NAO acts as a lead-organization, it is associated with lower effectiveness. Our findings suggest that it is not so much a matter of whether a network is centralized or not, but depends on: the behavior of the central actor, whether this central role is accepted by others, and whether the other network actors are still committed and involved, with a high sense of network ownership. Network results and relations thus seem to vary a great deal depending on the role-type of the NAO: Coordinating or leading. Although the literature acknowledges three basic types of network governance (Provan and Kenis 2008), these findings suggest that there may be at least four (i.e., lead-organization, shared-participant, leading-NAO, and coordinating-NAO-governed networks)—and network governance should perhaps be thought of as a continuum rather than as categorical types.

Although the theory on network governance predominantly concerns the organization of networks, the actions and behaviors of network actors with a leading or coordinating role offer additional understanding of both network governance and predictors of network effectiveness. This insight links the literature on network governance to that of network leadership. The latter includes characteristics and behaviors of network leaders, whereas the former includes network characteristics that may allow more or less effective networking through, for example, shared vision and trust (Clarke 2013; Li, Wang and Chen 2008). We believe that both literatures can benefit from each another. First, as illustrated in the above, by taking leadership behaviors into account, the network governance perspective can be enriched by the network leadership literature. Secondly, by explicitly taking the identity of the coordinating or leading actor into account, the network governance perspective may enrich the network leadership literature. Thirdly, both literatures may benefit from taking the broader network context into account: as we saw in our context, the national government loomed over the regional networks from the outside, which affected their internal dynamics. Thus, in the future, network governance and leadership should be intertwined further.

The findings also contribute to the scholarly discussion on what constitutes network effectiveness. In order to assess network effectiveness, two measures were used: The objective measure of the number of targets realized, and a subjective measure of network members' perceptions of effectiveness. Many network members rated the perceived effectiveness of their networks relatively high, and little variation was found—most likely because of false positives and negatives (Meier and O'Toole 2012). Hence, the two measures behaved in very different ways. They were not correlated and no significant

regression results were established for perceived effectiveness. Nevertheless, we believe that including stakeholder perceptions about performance provides a better and more complete picture, when used concomitantly with objective data. Future research should improve perceived effectiveness measurements. First, it would be particularly valuable to measure the actual rather than the predicted network continuity, using longitudinal network datasets that continue after the temporary or external funding has dried up. Second, future research on perceived network effectiveness should, ideally, not only use multiple criteria. It should also ask the various actors to evaluate their relative importance (Klijn 2007), especially when using surveys across various network contexts. And third, it would be best to also include data from the clients, to rate the quality of the services obtained (Provan and Milward 1995).

#### Implications for Practitioners

The result that having a NAO in a network is beneficial for funding actors, as long as the role is merely coordinating and facilitating, is highly relevant as this implies that monitoring and evaluating should not be merely based on goal attainment, but also on a check of actual involvement of other network members and the behavior of the NAO. The findings also imply that if funding actors put too much pressure on network actors to achieve numerical results, they may spoil long-term network objectives. Practitioners should thus be cautious about realizing high goal attainment at the expense of good network relations: Networks should be given time to develop.

#### Limitations and Future Research

The main limitation of the research reported herein pertains to the survey data; there were few statistically significant results for the relations and perceived effectiveness factors. Nevertheless, the other evidence from the two studies, from all 13 networks, was consistent and meaningful. By drawing from both the quantitative and qualitative data, the studies offer rich insights into organizing top-down stimulated regional networks.

Secondly, in Study 2 we compared 1- and 2-year-old networks, which are both still very young. The fact that we found differences between those networks is an indicator that network age might indeed be a relevant factor for explaining variance in network performance. Possibly, the aging effect diminishes after a certain amount of time: Compared to the differences between 1-year- and 2-year-old networks, the difference between 10-year and 10-year-old ones is likely to be negligible. A larger, longitudinal dataset, consisting of greater variation in the maturity of the networks may offer richer insights into the link between networks' relational quality and their results.

Third, this study equated networks' contexts with regional contexts. The historical context, in terms of prior activities and relations, are shown to have an important effect on how the networks emerge and perform. Hence, this variable should be systematically included in future (quantitative) analyses (Currie et al. 2011). More generally, future research on network effectiveness should incorporate multiple measures that are suitable for assessing both the short-term and long-term objectives of networks. These goals should be measured longitudinally, as we revealed that attaining quantitative targets and developing stable network relations are likely to occur non-synchronously. Regional networks that are translating and implementing national policies must be given the time to develop and evolve; carefully designed studies must trace if and how both task-based outcomes and relations might become balanced over the lifetimes of networks.

In terms of generalizability of the results, it should be noted that our sample consisted of top-down stimulated networks. The findings are probably not unique to the Dutch context, nor to the policy areas of education and employment. In many Western countries, regional or local networks are a means for central government to translate national-level policies into regional or local actions, with variations of policy contexts and social services, including (mental) healthcare of the elderly, homeless, and youth (Bazzoli et al. 2003; Conrad et al. 2003; Lemaire and Provan 2009; Mitchell and Shortell 2000). Collaborative networks, that experience a shadow of hierarchy and are pressurized with performance measurements (Scharpf 1997), often have to balance between realizing predetermined targets and establishing relations among its members. Networks that emerge bottom-up may not experience any tension, since such networks may not be pressurized in terms of output; in that case, they can develop more easily their relations and achieve their goals simultaneously.

### Concluding Remarks

On the short run, a service-implementation network may report high results despite, or in some cases even because, neglecting network relations. For the continuation of such a network's services, beyond temporary external funding, establishing high-quality network relations are found here of greater importance than obtaining results. First, because relations may be less easily repairable, and second, because networks with troubled relations are less likely to continue at all when external stimulation fades. A NAO may play a crucial role in balancing relations and results, by facilitating and coordinating the network, stimulating network ownership of other members, and by not taking over; the behavioral role of "the spider in the web" can thus make a network-performance difference.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary data is available at the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* online.

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