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**Reference:**

Raeymaeckers Peter, Vermeiren Caroline, Noël Charlotte, Van Puyvelde Stijn, Willems Jurgen.- The governance of public-nonprofit service networks : a comparison between three types of governance roles  
Voluntas: international journal of voluntary and non-profit organizations - ISSN 0957-8765 - (2017), p. 1-20  
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1007/S11266-017-9920-7>  
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1473580151162165141>

# The Governance of Public–Nonprofit Service Networks: A Comparison Between Three Types of Governance Roles

- Peter Raeymaeckers
- Caroline Vermeiren
- Charlotte Noël
- Stijn Van Puyvelde
- Jurgen Willems

## Abstract

In this research, we focus on the governance role of the coordinator affiliated to the leading agency in public–nonprofit service networks. We analyze the extent to which different types of coordinators are able to build consensus on a set of network goals in close collaboration with the nonprofit network partners. We explore three network cases, respectively, coordinated by a commissioner, a co-producer and a facilitator. Both network coordinators and respondents from participating nonprofit service agencies are interviewed. In contrast to earlier studies our analysis indicates that, in comparison with a facilitator, a commissioner and a co-producer are better equipped to reach consensus on a set of goals in service networks. The practice of synthesis is considered as very important when establishing consensus in a network.

## Keywords

Public–nonprofit Network governance Governance roles Network coordinator Qualitative research

## Résumé

Dans la présente recherche, nous nous concentrons sur le rôle de gouvernance que joue le coordonnateur affilié à l'organisme de tête des réseaux de services publics et sans but lucratif. Nous analysons dans quelle mesure différents types de coordonnateurs peuvent faire accepter à l'unanimité une série d'objectifs de réseau en collaborant étroitement avec des partenaires de réseaux sans but lucratif. Nous explorons trois réseaux coordonnés dans l'ordre par un commissaire, un coproducteur et un facilitateur. Des coordonnateurs de réseau et des représentants d'organismes de services sans but lucratif participants ont été invités à des interviews. Contrairement aux résultats d'études précédentes, notre analyse démontre que le commissaire et le coproducteur sont mieux placés que le facilitateur pour faire accepter une série d'objectifs à l'unanimité dans des réseaux de service. La pratique de synthèse est jugée essentielle à l'atteinte d'un consensus au sein d'un réseau.

## Zusammenfassung

In dieser Studie konzentrieren wir uns auf die Steuerungsrolle des Koordinators, der der führenden Vertretung in öffentlichen, gemeinnützigen Dienstleistungsnetzwerken angehört. Wir analysieren das Ausmaß, in dem verschiedene Koordinatortypen in der Lage sind, über eine Reihe von Netzwerkzielen in enger Zusammenarbeit mit den gemeinnützigen Netzwerkpartnern einen Konsens zu erzielen. Wir erforschen drei Netzwerkbeispiele, die jeweils von einem Beauftragten, einem Co-Produzenten und einem Vermittler koordiniert werden. Sowohl Netzwerkkoordinatoren und Personen von teilnehmenden gemeinnützigen Dienstleistungsstellen werden befragt. Im Gegensatz zu früheren Studien zeigt unsere Analyse, dass im Vergleich zu einem Vermittler ein Beauftragter und ein Co-Produzent besser gerüstet sind, über eine Reihe von Zielen in Dienstleistungsnetzwerken einen Konsensus zu erzielen. Das Syntheseverfahren wird für die Erzielung eines Konsensus in einem Netzwerk als besonders wichtig erachtet.

## Resumen

En la presente investigación, nos centramos en el papel de la gobernanza del coordinador afiliado a una agencia destacada en redes de servicio público sin ánimo de lucro. Analizamos hasta qué punto diferentes tipos de coordinadores pueden crear consenso en un conjunto de metas de la red en estrecha colaboración con socios de la red sin ánimo de lucro. Exploramos tres casos de red coordinados respectivamente por un comisionado, un coproductor y un facilitador. Se entrevistó tanto los coordinadores de red como a los encuestados de agencias de servicio sin ánimo de lucro participantes. En contraste con estudios anteriores, nuestro análisis indica que, en comparación a un facilitador, un comisionado y un coproductor están mejor equipados para alcanzar consenso sobre un conjunto de metas en las redes de servicio. La práctica de síntesis se considera como muy importante cuando se establece consenso en una red.

## Chinese

在本研究中,我们专注于公共-非盈利服务网络中的领先机构附属协调员的管理角色。我们与非盈利网络合作伙伴紧密合作,分析了不同类型的协调员能够就一组网络目标达成共识的程度。我们探讨了三个分别由专员、共同制作人和促进者协调的网络案例。我们对参与非盈利服务机构的网络协调员和回答者进行了调查。与早期的研究相比,我们的分析师表明,与促进者相比,专员和共同制作人能更好地就服务网络的一组目标达成共识。当确定网络中的共识时,综合的做法被视为非常重要。

## Japanese

本研究では、公共の非営利組織のサービスネットワークにおいて大手代理店に関連するコーディネーターのガバナンスの役割について焦点を当てる。異なるタイプのコーディネーターが非営利組織のネットワークのパートナーと密接に協力して、ネットワークの目標を一致させて構築が可能なことを分析する。コミッショナー、共同製作者、ファシリテーターの3つのネットワークの事例をそれぞれ調査する。非営利組織のサービス部門が参加するネットワーク・コーディネーターと解答者にインタビューした。先行研究の分析におけるファシリテーターを比較すると、コミッショナーと共同製作者はサービスネットワークの目標に一致していることがわかった。統合一致はネットワークを構築するときに非常に重要だと考えられている。

## Arabic

شركات في الرائدة لوكالة التابع لمدنسق الحكم دور على نركز ال بحث، هذا في على المندسين من مخ تلفة أنواع قدرة مدى بتحليل نقوم. ربحية التغيير العامة الخدمات شركاء مع الوثيق بال تعاون الشبكات أهداف من مجموعة حول الآراء في توافق بناء عن التوالي على تنسيقها تم شبكات حالات ثلاث ن فحص نحن. ربحية التغيير الشبكات منسقي من لكل مقابلة تم به بالتسهيل يقوم وشخص مشارك من نتج م فوض، طريق من النقيض على. المشاركة ربحية التغيير الخدمات وكالات من والمسند تج بين الشبكات يقوم الذي الشخص مع بالمقارنة أنه، إلى تحدينا ي شير السابق، الدراسات إلى لتوصل أفضل ب شكل مجهزين المشاركين والم نتج الم فوض ي كون به التسهيل، مهمة المزج ممارسة تمبر. الخدمات شبكات في الأهداف من مجموعة بشأن الآراء في توافق شبكات في الآراء في توافق إن شاء عند ”جدا“

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## Introduction

Researchers and administrators increasingly emphasize the important role of networks that join efforts of a large variety of nonprofit service organizations to address the complex problems of vulnerable target groups. Provan and Milward (2001) define these networks as ‘service delivery vehicles’ providing value to a population confronted with varying needs, in ways that could not be achieved by a single organization. In this paper, we analyze the role of the network coordinator in establishing goal consensus in lead organization-governed public–nonprofit networks. These networks consist of local public and nonprofit organizations that provide services to people in their community. The local public agency acts as the lead organization of the network and is responsible for the network’s governance. In this responsibility, public authorities typically appoint a coordinator to assist the leading public actor in governing the network. Hence, the coordinator is considered as an important governing actor in these networks (Provan and Kenis 2008; Edelenbos et al. 2013). Research on network governance is rather rare in the nonprofit literature (Renz and Andersson 2014). We extend

current research by focusing on lead organization-governed public–nonprofit networks and analyzing the role of the coordinator in these networks.

An important challenge for the network coordinator is to integrate the joined efforts of a variety of service organizations (Rosenheck et al. [1998](#); Provan and Milward [1995](#); Raeymaeckers [2015](#); Raeymaeckers and Kenis [2016](#)). When a network addresses the ‘wicked issues’ (Rittel and Webber [1973](#); Buck et al. [2011](#)) of very complex and vulnerable target groups, the expertise of a diverse set of network actors becomes necessary. In order to pursue its goal, the network needs to achieve a certain ‘unity in effort’ by integrating the efforts of the diverse set of participating organizations. To establish this unity in effort, a consensus among the diverse network actors on the network goal is considered as crucial (Provan and Kenis [2008](#); Kenis and Provan [2009](#); Span et al. [2012a](#)). Such consensus is, however, difficult to establish (Vangen and Huxham [2012](#)). When a very diverse set of network actors participate, conflicts often arise and consensus on network goals is very difficult to reach (Span et al. [2012b](#)). Hence, we argue that scientific evidence is necessary to better understand how the coordinator affiliated to the leading public agency can establish goal consensus in lead organization-governed public–nonprofit networks.

We analyze three networks where the coordinator affiliated to the leading public agency, respectively, adopts one out of three different governance roles: a facilitator, a co-producer and a commissioner (Span et al. [2012a](#)). The networks of our study aim to provide services to families with children in poverty. As these families struggle with very diverse problems on different life domains, network coordinators need to connect with organizations with different kinds of expertise to provide an answer to the complex problems of their clients. Span et al. ([2012b](#)) put forward the claim that a facilitating governance role is very effective in these networks. In this article we empirically investigate this proposition. We use a qualitative research approach to analyze the perceptions of network participants about the goal-setting process and the governance role adopted by the network coordinator. In our analysis the network coordinator is a representative from the leading agency, responsible for the governance of the network.

Our study makes a contribution to the scientific literature in three ways. First, we answer the call of Stone and Ostrower ([2007](#)) to build further on the literature on public governance to offer useful insights and conceptual tools to provide a better understanding about how public–nonprofit networks should be governed. Despite the fact that many nonprofit governance scholars have emphasized the importance of networks (Cornforth [2012](#); Renz and Andersson [2014](#)) and public–nonprofit partnerships (Gazley and Brudney [2007](#); Salamon and Toepler [2015](#); Brandson and Pape [2015](#)), empirical research on the governance of networks is very scarce in the field of nonprofit governance (Cairns and Harris [2011](#); Cornforth et al. [2014](#); Stone et al. [2010](#), [2014](#)). In contrast, most scholars on nonprofit governance have

mainly focused on governance of single organizations and consider the board as the main focus of analysis (Cornforth [2012](#); Ostrower and Stone [2006](#); Stone and Ostrower [2007](#)). Our analysis adopts a network approach by focusing on the governance of the whole network of nonprofit and public organizations. We more specifically improve scientific insights by using the typology of Span et al. ([2012a](#)) to analyze the governance of lead organization-governed networks consisting of both public and nonprofit organizations.

Second, this approach allows us to compare different networks governed by different types of coordinators. As comparative research on this topic is very scarce (Isett et al. [2011](#)), our in-depth comparison of three networks governed by different types of coordinators improves the understanding on the performance of different governance roles and provides in-depth insights on how coordinating agencies could and should be involved in the goal-setting process to reach a consensus among the different network actors.

Third, our multi-stakeholder approach allows us to provide a clear image of the perceptions that different stakeholders have regarding the way the network is governed or as Span et al. ([2012a](#), 1191) put it, ‘to flesh out the perceptions and rationales for the governance roles adopted and how they are operationalized.’ As stakeholders can have very different needs and preferences, very different access to resources, and maintain very different goals (Balser and McClusky [2005](#)), their expectations toward the role of the coordinator can be different. Our multi-stakeholder perspective is particularly important for networks of nonprofit and public service agencies. We emphasize that any analysis on network governance of service networks should shed light on the perspective of participating nonprofit service agencies, on how according to their view the network must be governed. Therefore, our study complements earlier studies by explicitly making a distinction between perceptions of coordinators and perceptions of network actors. This approach allows us to provide an in-depth analysis on how network governance can be more effectively established in everyday practice.

### Goal Consensus and Network Governance

In their seminal article, Lawrence and Lorsch ([1967](#)) introduced differentiation and integration as the key challenges for the functioning of modern organizations. They emphasize that the more differentiated an organization is, the more integrated its parts must be in order to perform effectively. A similar reasoning can be applied to networks of organizations as this is very common to the challenges networks of organizations are confronted with (Provan and Milward [1995](#)). As argued above, the networks we study presuppose a differentiated set of organizations to collaborate in order to achieve results (Lawrence and Lorsch [1967](#); Buck et al. [2011](#)). In many studies the focus lies on goal-directed networks, often consisting of

three or more organizations collaborating to fulfill a common goal (Provan and Kenis [2008](#)).

The literature states that in order to integrate the efforts of a diverse set of nonprofit organizations, a consensus must be established among participants on the joint goals of the network. Many scholars argue that goal consensus allows participants to perform better and will positively influence the smooth collaboration in the network (Van de Ven [1976](#); Provan and Kenis [2008](#)). More specifically, when a consensus is established, network participants are more likely to be involved and committed to the network and more likely to work together (Provan and Kenis [2008](#)). When a consensus is lacking, this will negatively influence the smooth collaboration and effectiveness of the network (Ziviani et al. [2013](#); Harker et al. [2004](#); Statham [2011](#)). Studies, however, show that consensus on the joint network goals is dependent on the level of congruency that can be established between the organizational goals of network participants and the joint network goals at the collaborative level (Vangen and Huxham [2012](#)). For obvious reasons, we can state that consensus is easy to establish in networks with a high level of congruency. In these networks the diversity among network actors is often very low and the joint network goals perfectly align with the organizational goals of all network participants.

However, Vangen and Huxham ([2012](#)) emphasize that when networks aim to tackle very complex and wicked issues, the expertise of a diverse set of organizations becomes indispensable. These diverse networks are confronted with low levels of congruency when trying to include the expertise of a diverse set of organizational actors to reach the joint goal of the network (Vangen and Huxham [2012](#)). As a result, goal consensus is difficult to establish and conflicts can appear resulting from a lack of alignment between the joint network goals and the organizational goals of the network participants (Agranoff and McGuire [2001](#)). We argue that in these networks the management of diversity is an important and continuous challenge for network governance (Vangen and Huxham [2012](#)). Some authors, however, argue that consensus is often too difficult or even impossible to establish (Vangen and Huxham [2012](#)). For this reason, these authors state that goal consensus must not be considered as an important 'requirement for success' (Vangen and Huxham [2012](#):757). In this article we agree that in very diverse networks, a high level of network consensus can be impossible to reach. However, in line with the abovementioned studies emphasizing the important role of goal consensus on joint network goals (Van de Ven [1976](#); Ziviani et al. [2013](#); Harker et al. [2004](#); Statham [2011](#)), we argue that when no consensus is possible, collaboration among actors is very hard to maintain and the network will fail. In these networks where consensus is hard to reach, an important responsibility lies in the hands of the governing actor. This coordinating actor must ensure the functioning of the network by carefully establishing a sufficient level of goal consensus while at the same time taking into account the diversity among network actors (Provan and Kenis [2008](#)).

According to Provan and Kenis (2008), even in networks where coordinators are able to establish a low or intermediate level of consensus the network can be able to fulfill its goal.

In the literature, many attempts have been undertaken to determine how networks can be governed. Provan and Kenis (2008) identified three different forms of network governance: lead organization governance; network administrative organization (NAO); and a shared participant governance. This typology has been widely used as a conceptual framework to study inter-organizational service networks. Some work has focused on shared participant types of governance where the network is regulated by all network actors (Raeymaeckers 2015; Raeymaeckers and Kenis 2016). However, most research has focused on lead organization types of governance (Provan and Milward 1995; Human and Provan 2000; Span et al. 2012a; Edelenbos et al. 2013). In these networks one leading agency has the main responsibility to govern the network and, according to Provan and Kenis (2008), is best equipped to govern the network when only low or intermediate levels of goal consensus can be established. This study focuses on the role of the coordinator—affiliated to this leading agency—dealing with the task of looking for goal consensus in highly diverse networks. In the next paragraph we focus on different types of governance roles coordinators can adopt to govern the network.

## Types of Governance Roles

We use the typology of Span et al. (2012a) to make a distinction between three different governance roles that can be positioned on a top-down–bottom-up continuum: commissioner, co-producer and facilitator. A key feature of this typology is the extent to which decision-making power in the network is concentrated in the hands of the governing actor. At one extreme, the coordinator can make all decisions without consulting the network partners. At the other extreme, the decision-making power lies in the hands of the network partners (Span et al. 2012a). The *commissioner* can be situated at the top-down end of the governance continuum (Span et al. 2012a). This type of coordinator has a large amount of power and makes decisions independently. He or she determines how the network functions, stipulates which goals must be achieved, and how the network must be structured. The network partners are seen as executors of these decisions. This lack of influence by the partners also means that the network partners generally have less responsibility and have to invest less time and resources in the network. At the other end of the continuum, the coordinator acts as a *facilitator*. His main goal is to support the collaboration between the different network partners. The coordinator does not make any decisions. The power lies in the hands of the participating actors. The final decisions are made by the partners, which therefore have strong power in the network. Consequently, this means that the network partners are also supposed to invest more time in the network and have more responsibility for the network

outcomes. Situated between the top-down and bottom-up extremes is the role of the *co-producer*. Here, the coordinator and the network partners strive for a balanced collaboration, in which the coordinator is seen as an equal partner next to the other organizations in the network. The decisions are made collectively, taking all partners, the coordinator included, into account. Consequently, the ultimate responsibility rests with all network partners including the coordinator.

We argue that the aforementioned typology, constructed by Span et al. (2012a), adds very important aspects to the research area of network governance. Rethemeyer (2005) concludes in a literature review that all governance roles developed in literature can be positioned on a continuum between bottom-up and top-down governance. Span et al. (2012a) have developed the first typology that explicitly takes this continuum into account to construct different network governance roles. We therefore view it as a very relevant framework for the analysis of public–nonprofit network governance.

Furthermore, Span et al. (2012b) emphasize that the performance of the governance roles is dependent on two different types of network contingencies: stability and complexity. Stability refers to the predictability of the activities that have to be performed by the network. Complexity refers to the degree of coordination required to let the network perform well. According to Span et al. (2012b), in networks that can be categorized as stable and simple, a top-down type of governance (commissioner) will achieve the best results. In these networks the tasks can be described as rather simple and network actors should act according to strict regulations set by the government. These networks often have a very low level of diversity among network partners. In this study we focus on networks providing services toward vulnerable target groups. These networks are considered as complex and dynamic, with very complicated tasks (Span et al. 2012a, b). The problems of these target groups often need ‘customized’ or tailor-made solutions. The services provided by the network of nonprofit service agencies need to be provided according to the specific and varying needs of the target group. For this reason, Span et al. (2012b) argue that a facilitating coordinating role performs well in these highly complex networks. These coordinators allow network partners to participate in the decision making at the network level. As a result, the expertise of a very diverse set of network partners can be integrated to provide an answer to the complex problems of the network’s target group (Span et al. 2012b). Following the abovementioned findings of Vangen and Huxham (2012), we can state that in these networks the congruency between joint network goals and the goals of participating organizations is very low. In these networks the search for goal consensus can be considered as an important challenge for the coordinator. In this article we empirically investigate this proposition by comparing the goal-setting process between three networks governed by coordinators adopting different types of governance roles.

## Method

### Case Selection

In Flanders 72 networks are founded at the level of the municipality or city to improve the provision of services to families with children in poverty. In all these networks the organizations exchange information about families in poverty and undertake different actions to improve service delivery to families with children. Using insights of Span et al. (2012b), we can define these networks as complex and dynamic. The needs of families with children in poverty, the target group of these networks, can be defined as 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber 1973). This target group therefore needs 'customized' or tailor-made solutions delivered by a highly diverse set of service organizations (Span et al. 2012a). First, we had to select the relevant cases from the total list of 72 networks. The 72 networks showed large variations in terms of type of clients and governing actors. We decided to conduct a purposive sampling method (Yin 2014) to focus our qualitative analysis on a limited selection of relevant cases that would allow us to meet our research aim. We follow Bryman (2008) and Yin (2014) stating that this sampling method allows the researchers to better understand the social processes in a given context. As our aim is not to generalize findings, but to understand the process of network coordination, we argue that this sampling method will advance our understanding on the extent to which different types of coordinators are able to establish goal consensus (Yin 2014).

In a first step, we decided to select networks governed by a public actor that provides services to families in poverty. We therefore made a first selection according to four criteria. First of all, a public agency affiliated to the local government had to be the leading agency of the network. Second, the network and its organizations have to work with families with children in poverty. The network also has to consist of a diverse set of autonomous nonprofit organizations and finally, the child poverty rate in the municipality has to be higher than the average rate. As our study aims to analyze the role of the governing public actor in networks dealing with complex and wicked issues (Span et al. 2012a), we considered these criteria very important for selecting the appropriate cases for our research. As a result, ten networks were considered as relevant for our research. In a next step, our aim was to select three cases that showed a distinctive variation in terms of network governance. As our study is focused on analyzing how different types of coordinators are able to establish goal consensus, we needed to look for networks where the coordinators apply different governance roles. We therefore interviewed the coordinators and network partners of these ten networks on which role the coordinator applied while steering the network. We used the perspective of both network partners and network coordinator to determine the governance role. Using this information we selected one network where the coordinator adopts a facilitating role, one where the coordinator adopts a co-producing role and one where the coordinator adopts

a commissioner role. Given our purposive sampling method (Morris [2006](#)), this variation allowed us to conduct a comparative in-depth analysis on the extent to which different types of coordinators are able to establish goal consensus in the network.

Table [1](#) provides basic information about the selected networks (Network A, B and C). Table [2](#) presents an overview of the different types of services provided by the organizations in the selected networks. We observe that the three networks are characterized by a high level of diversity, with different types of services being provided.

**Table 1**  
Overview of selected research cases

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>
Type of network governance <sup>a</sup>	Leading organization	Leading organization	Leading organization
Type of governance role <sup>b</sup>	Facilitator	Co-producer	Commissioner
Target group	Families with children in poverty in the municipality	Families with children in poverty in the municipality	All families with children in the municipality, with a special focus on families in poverty
Type of services provided	Events and information sessions for professionals and target group	Information tools and information sessions for professionals with focus on making the bridge between local associations and local educational institutions	Courses for target group and material help through the network second hand store

<sup>a</sup>Provan and Kenis ([2008](#))

<sup>b</sup>Span et al. ([2012](#))

**Table 2**  
Overview type of services provided by organizations in selected research cases

Service domain	A	B	C
Financial services	1	1	1
Cultural activities	1		
Local government	1		1
Health care	4		1
Parenting support	2	1	1
Education	2	13	3
Sociocultural associations	2		1
Leisure	1	3	1
Coaching children and families	1	3	
Poverty organizations		1	1
Total	15	22	10

### Network A: The Facilitator

The first case consists of an inter-organizational network located in a municipality in Brussels. The public center for social welfare took the initiative to apply for this funding, which was eventually granted and led to the appointment of a network coordinator who was hired by all network partners together. The network partners stated that the coordinator was appointed by them to support the participating network partners to formulate a common framework and one network vision and to support the practical execution of the projects. This coordinator can thus be defined as a facilitator according to the typology of Span et al. (2012a). Her official task is to serve the demands of the network partners.

### Network B: The Co-producer

The second case consists of an inter-organizational network also located in a municipality in Brussels. As in the previous network, the public center for social welfare took a leading role in the initiation of the network. It was the conviction of the coordinator that the goals of the network had to be based on the needs of everybody involved including the needs of the coordinator and the leading organization. The initial role of the coordinator could thus be characterized as a co-producer, located at the center of the typology of Span et al. (2012a).

## Network C: The Commissioner

The third case is a Flemish inter-organizational network located at a municipality in Antwerp. Similar to the previous cases, the public center for social welfare was the initiating and leading organization that drew up the project proposal that was eventually approved for funding. This approval led to the appointment of a coordinator, a process that was initiated by the public center for social welfare. The coordinator emphasized that it was her task to lead the network in the right direction, and that in this process, she had a significant amount of control. The initial role of the coordinator could thus clearly be characterized as a commissioner, located at the top-down end of the typology of Span et al. ([2012a](#)).

### Qualitative Interviews

We use qualitative interviews with network coordinators and network partners in order to gain insights into the way that they perceive the governance as executed by the network coordinator (Denzin and Lincoln [2000](#)).

The first step in the data-gathering process was to interview the network coordinators. The second step was to interview the other network partners. We first asked the coordinator to point out the organizations he or she had the most contact with. We then started to interview members of these organizations about the way they experienced the goal-setting process and the role of the coordinator. In addition, we also contacted organizations that were not pointed out by the coordinator to avoid potential bias. Table [3](#) shows the numbers of coordinators and network partners interviewed. We used a semi-structured questionnaire, which included questions on the role of the coordinator (1) during the goal-setting process of the network, (2) the selection of partners that are included in the network, (3) the way tasks are divided and (4) the evaluation of the network activities. In this article we focused on the particular set of questions on the goal-setting process. We asked for information on the network goals, how coordinators formulated the network goals, the extent to which consensus existed, how coordinators established goal consensus and the perception of partners on this process. The respondents were asked to illustrate their findings with examples of real-life situations and discussions during the network meetings.

**Table 3**  
Overview of conducted interviews

	<b>Network A</b>	<b>Network B</b>	<b>Network C</b>
Number of coordinators (interviewed)	1(1)	1(1)	2(2)
Number of partners (interviewed)	15(10)	22(12)	10(9)

Table 3 represents an overview of the number of network partners, the number of partners that were interviewed (and the number of actual interviews) and the number of coordinators (and the number of actual interviews).

After the interviews were fully transcribed, we used NVivo software for open coding, followed by a process of axial coding (Berg 1989). In this last phase, the different open codes were grouped into categories and sub-categories, based on the research of Span et al. (2012a). We made a distinction between the codes that were gathered from the interviews with the coordinators and the codes that were collected from the interviews with the network partners. We then focused on the codes that gave information on how and the extent to which the coordinators were able to establish goal consensus in the networks.

During the analysis we introduced some additional measures to enhance the face validity of this research, more precisely, to make sure that our research measures reflect what they intend to measure (Hardesty and Bearden 2004). First of all, the coding process was supported by a codebook developed in close collaboration between three researchers who worked on this project. The codebook was reviewed after analyzing each interview and after every coding round. This resulted in a codebook that was straightforward and unambiguous. Another measure involved was the large amount of interviews that were conducted in each research case. We made sure that the selection of interviewed organizations reflected the diversity of the network. By doing so, we pursued a good balance between the views of the network partners and the views of the network coordinators in the presentation of the results.

## Results

In this section, we discuss the results and clarify how the different governance roles are perceived by the various stakeholders involved. We first elaborate on the results of the network where the coordinator adopts a facilitating role (network A). Subsequently, we focus on the network with a co-producer (network B) and the network with a commissioner (network C).

### Network A: The Facilitator

This network was initially governed by a facilitating coordinator. This means that the coordinator was very reluctant to intervene during the goal-setting

process. Her initial aim was to support the network actors to formulate the network goals by themselves. Our interviews, however, show that during the goal-setting process the coordinator decided to make a shift from a facilitating role toward a commissioner role. An important reason for this shift is the lack of consensus among partners on the overall goals of the network. The coordinator emphasizes that the differentiation of network partners resulting in different views on the joint network goals made it impossible to establish consensus on the network goals. Each organization had its own idea of the goals that should be prioritized in the network. Some of the organizations wanted to focus on pedagogical support, others on health prevention, and others wanted to create a garden for children to work in, while others wanted to focus on schooling.

Each organization has its own insights and approach, there were a lot of different ideas in the beginning. There were times when I said to my superior: 'how is it possible that you got them all together and that they hired me?' [...], the ideas are so different. (Coordinator network A)

The coordinator stated that she was not able to establish a consensus when adopting a facilitating role. As a result she decided to 'push through,' meaning that she started taking decisions without consulting the whole network. This resulted in a focus on one particular project, 'Kids day,' an event that was organized to bring parents, children and local organizations together by organizing workshops and other activities on one location in the municipality during 1 day. It was the coordinator who made the decision to focus on this project at the expense of other ideas that were formulated by the partners.

Because the coordinator experienced many difficulties to establish consensus on the network goals, she discussed many issues with the representative of the public center for social welfare, the leading organization of the network. The coordinator emphasized that during these discussions decisions were often made beforehand, which led to a biased decision-making process in which the coordinator and the leading agency had more influence on the development of the network goals compared to others. This led to a situation in which the network partners did not support the decisions that were being made, as they were often not involved in the decision-making process.

There are things that I suggested of which [my boss of the public center for social welfare] said 'no, that's not going to happen'. [...] So yes, in that way the public center for social welfare has more say, because my boss works at the public center for social welfare. (Coordinator network A)

The coordinator thus admits that many decisions concerning the network goals are already being made behind the scenes. This situation followed from two developments. First, the coordinator experienced a lack of goal consensus among the partners, which led to the coordinator taking control over the situation, as she felt that the network was heading nowhere without her

guidance. Second, the leading public agency has a lot of influence behind the scenes, which led to the fact that a number of ideas and proposals were already dismissed before they were even on the table. We can therefore state that the leading agency pushes the facilitating coordinator to become a commissioner.

Our analysis of network A shows that when the partners in a network are very differentiated and not acquainted with one another, and when a common goal cannot be established, a facilitating coordinator, in order to achieve the network goals, should take some control and will naturally shift more toward the role of commissioner. In this case both the leading agency and the coordinator decided that a facilitating role is not the best way to establish consensus among network partners. The network actors were unable to formulate a consensus on which goals the network had to pursue. Most of the decisions were made by the representative of the leading agency and the coordinator.

### Network B: The Co-producer

In network B, the coordinator adopts a co-producing role. The coordinator emphasizes that decisions have to be made in close collaboration between the network actors and the leading agency. More specifically, it was the coordinator's conviction that she had to set the goals together with the partners and that these goals had to be based on the needs of everybody involved, including the needs of the leading public agency, the public center for social welfare. This participative goal-setting process in which all voices are heard is an important characteristic of a co-producing coordinator (Span et al. [2012a](#), [b](#)). This coordinator wants to involve all network partners in the formulation of the network goals, including the leading agency in the formulation of the network goals.

The coordinator's first task was to guide the process of defining the network goals. She initiated the process by visiting and questioning many partners about their problems and needs. The network partners also gained the opportunity to formulate suggestions about the network goals. This process was confirmed by all network actors:

Yes, we have been consulted. They came to us to ask questions, as well as to the others. Afterwards they presented us the result of all these questions and this allowed us to see that we are not the only ones with problems. It allowed us to put words on our problems in order to further create a project together to solve them. (Partner network B)

In a next step the coordinator analyzed this information and presented the results of the discussions on a meeting with the entire network. As a result, the entire network including all network partners and the leading agency formulated and approved a set of network goals.

The first set of goals of network B focused on a better knowledge and awareness of organizations and initiatives in the municipality to improve referrals from one organization to another. Next, the network also focused on sensitizing personnel of schools in order to treat children in poverty in a better and more respectful way. In contrast with network A, the initial co-producer role adopted by the coordinator has not changed over time. She sticks to her co-producer role, which is often described by the partners as bottom-up, open, participative, efficient and decisive.

She is a super catalytic converter for all our reflections and our ideas. She succeeds at linking everything and at making really good synthesis of what we say. She synthesises and at the same time it is hyper participative. It is [...] very open in fact. It is not at all directive, really not at all. (Partner network B)

We conclude that the co-producing coordinator was actively involved in establishing a goal consensus with every actor in the network. She organized one-on-one discussions with every individual network actor and presented the results of these discussions at a meeting with the entire network. In a final step she guided the entire network in making a well-informed decision on the network goals. As a result, all actors, including the leading agency, have the feeling of being involved and of having a role to play in the realization of these goals. The good result of the co-producing governance role can, however, be explained by the lack of conflicts among network partners. Our results show that in comparison with network A, the coordinator experienced less variation among network actors on which goals the networks should pursue. Moreover, all respondents of network B emphasized that few difficulties were encountered in finding goal consensus. As a result, an agreement was easily established on the network goals. This again contrasts the results of network A where the network coordinator experienced many difficulties to reconcile the varying views among network actors.

### Network C: The Commissioner

In network C where the coordinator adopts a commissioner role, an extra coordinator was hired who partially took over some of the tasks as the network started to develop and expand. When we zoom in on the actual formulation of the network goals in network C, we find that in this case, the network goals were largely determined by the coordinators, who came also up with the majority of ideas for specific actions and projects. As already mentioned before, the main goal of this network is to reach the target group—families with children with a specific focus on families in poverty—more effectively, and to create more awareness and collaboration in the fragmented landscape of organizations focusing on poverty reduction in their municipality.

Our analysis shows that the coordinators emphasize that it is impossible to get each network partner involved to discuss every detail and to get each partner involved in every step of the goal-setting process, as this leads to inefficient decision making. The main reason is that in this network the partners show a high level of differentiation. The coordinators of network C emphasize that they encounter a high level of variation among network partners concerning their preferences regarding the network goals. This finding contrasts the result of network B where our respondents experience a very low level of variation among network actors concerning their views on the network goals. The coordinators of network C therefore emphasize that open discussions about the network goals among the diverse range of partners would therefore be very difficult. As every partner has its own wishes and demands, the coordinator and partners emphasize that it is more efficient to limit the level of participation of the partners. This strategy was applied by the network coordinators to avoid conflicts during the goal-setting process. They felt that, because of this lack of agreement on joint network goals, an open discussion could lead to conflicts among participants. This conflict could, according to the coordinators, negatively influence the functioning of the network.

We prepare something in advance. There's no use in getting all the partners together to say 'tell us, tell us, what do you want, what's possible?', [...] and that it finally turns out that what they want/propose is budgetary not possible. That's not how it's supposed to go, you want to get somewhere [...], but there's no point in investing time in something and then saying 'no, it's not possible'. (Coordinator network C)

For this reason, the coordinators first formulated some general ideas about the goals that the network, according to them, should pursue. In a second step they had one-on-one discussions with all network actors on the ideas that were formulated by themselves. Using the information they gathered during these discussions they did some minor adjustments on their initial ideas about the network goals. Finally, the decision about the final set of network goals was made by the network coordinators and the network partners were then informed about this decision on a meeting with the entire network. We conclude that in contrast with network B where the decisions on the final network goals are made by all network actors including the leading agency, the network goals of network C were largely determined by the coordinators. By doing so, the coordinators try to find a balance between getting partners actively involved and working in a way that feels efficient, without losing grip on the network and without losing the ability to make unilateral decisions if necessary.

Our analysis shows that network partners are satisfied about the way the goals are determined in the network. They agreed to the fact that the coordinator has the opportunity to invest more time in the network and hence can effectuate more ideas and think more about the implications and

the practical elaboration of network projects and initiatives. Both the network partners and the coordinator emphasize that this is the best way to achieve the network goals most effectively.

You've got your own projects, you've got a lot of work with that, and to also make time for totally different projects [...], that's just too much to ask, we couldn't do that. And that's why I think it's very good, they make proposals and you can give feedback on that. We think that's fine, and then you can get involved 'we can do this, we can do that', and that's different for every organization. (Partner network C)

We conclude that the coordinators in this network adopt a commissioner role. Special emphasis should be put on the fact that, despite the presence of more than one coordinator, the power to set the network goals is still primarily situated at the coordination level, admittedly divided between the different coordinators. Toward the network as a whole, the coordinators adopt a commissioner role, which is broadly accepted by the different network partners as this improves the efficiency and effectiveness of the network.

## Discussion and Conclusion

One of the key challenges for networks of nonprofit service organizations and public agencies is to establish an integrated network among a differentiated set of service agencies (Provan and Kenis [2008](#); Raeymaeckers [2015](#); Raeymaeckers and Kenis [2016](#)). Following earlier studies we argue that a crucial step in creating an integrated network is to find consensus among network actors on the goal of the network (Van de Ven [1976](#); Provan and Kenis [2008](#)). However, we argue that the creation of consensus on a common goal is a very challenging task. As nonprofit organizations have their own individual goals to fulfill, tensions can arise when the network does not take these individual goals into account. Network governance should therefore look for ways to create consensus among a set of network goals, taking into consideration the individual goals of the organizations participating in the network. This study makes a contribution to the exponentially growing body of scientific studies focusing on the governance of public–nonprofit networks (Cairns and Harris [2011](#); Cornforth et al. [2014](#); Stone et al. [2010](#), [2014](#)) by analyzing how goal consensus can be reached in three public–nonprofit networks governed by a leading organization (Provan and Kenis [2008](#)).

We follow literature showing that the coordinator affiliated to the leading agency can adopt different roles while coordinating the network (Span et al. [2012a](#)), often situated on a continuum between bottom-up and top-down. The typology of Span et al. ([2012a](#)) was used to analyze the governance roles adopted in our three network cases. We made a distinction between a facilitator, a co-producer and a commissioner. The key question of our study concerns the extent to which each of these governance roles is able to establish a consensus on the common goal of the network. Our qualitative

research provides two important guidelines for the governance of public–nonprofit networks.

First, our study indicates that in networks with a large diversity of network actors and where a consensus is difficult to establish, a facilitating network coordinator does not perform well. In these networks a more steering type of governance role clearly performs better. Our finding therefore contrasts the proposition of Span et al. (2012a, b), stating that in complex networks a facilitator is the most effective governance role. This finding is illustrated in network A. The coordinator of this network emphasizes that in this network, a facilitating role was impossible to maintain. The network is not able to make a decision based on a consensus among network partners. The coordinator therefore decides to adopt a more leading role as a commissioner to overcome the differences and to establish a shared set of network goals. In the views of network actors and network coordinators, the diversity among network actors plays an important role in determining the role of the coordinator. The higher the level of diversity among network partners, the more difficult it will be to find a consensus. We, however, find that consensus can be established when a commissioner governs a network consisting of a very diverse set of nonprofit organizations. In network C both partners and network coordinators positively evaluate the way the network goals are established. We more specifically show that the network partners stress the advantages of a commissioner in terms of efficiency. These findings clearly show that in highly differentiated networks a commissioner is necessary when trying to find a consensus on the common goal. In network B the results show that our respondents perceive less conflict and tensions than the respondents of network C. As a result, the co-producer experiences few difficulties to establish goal consensus among network actors. All partners agree on the network goals and have the feeling of being involved in the formulation and realization of the common network goal. According to these results, we argue that in networks where actors and coordinators perceive few differences among participants on the common goal, a co-producing coordinator will be able to establish goal consensus.

Second, we emphasize that the participation of network actors in the formulation of network goals is essential when trying to establish goal consensus. Interestingly, the positive result of both types of governance roles in networks B and C (commissioner and co-producer) can be explained by the practice of synthesis, which was conducted in both networks. In his highly influential work on brokerage, Burt (2004) emphasized the important role of synthesis by brokers in a network. According to Burt (2004), synthesis reduces conflicts among different network actors when brokers use the information they gather from different parts of the network to create new ideas. In networks B and C the coordinators created a synthesis on network goals using the information they gathered during the one-on-one discussions with different network actors. Network coordinators synthesized the information and formulated the network goals which they then discussed

with all the network actors. In case A where the network was governed by a facilitator, the coordinator was also involved in one-on-one discussions but was very reluctant to make a synthesis on the network goals. The final decisions about the network goals were made in close collaboration with the leading organization, without consulting the network actors. As a result, participants were less satisfied with the final decision on the goals of the network.

As networks become increasingly important for nonprofit organizations, this study aims to foster further debate between scholars of organizational and network governance on how public–nonprofit networks should be governed. In this study we have analyzed how network governance is able to create a set of network goals, while at the same time allowing the participating nonprofit organizations to participate in the decision making. We point out three important challenges for future research.

First, more work must be conducted to unravel the causal relation between network governance and network consensus. In this article we used qualitative data to provide empirical evidence on how different types of network coordinators were able to establish network consensus among a diverse set of network actors. Additional evidence on the causal relation between governance and consensus could be provided by conducting a quantitative longitudinal study on the performance of network coordinators over a certain period of time. Such an approach could for example provide more evidence on the extent to which the governance role is dependent on how the composition of the network changes over time (Provan and Kenis [2008](#)). For example, a longitudinal research design allows the researcher to test the hypothesis that when a given network coordinated by a facilitator attracts more and diverse network participants, the network coordinator will be more able to build consensus when he or she switches to a commissioner role.

A second challenge refers to the notion of power. We focus on the distribution of power in decision making among network participants and different types of coordinators (facilitator, co-producer and commissioner), with the commissioner typically being more influential in public–nonprofit networks. Van Rensburg et al. ([2016](#)), however, argue that this notion of power may fail to capture the more subtle ways in which power reveals itself in networks of service organizations. They therefore suggest to study power in networks using the concept of governmentality, analyzing how power is dispersed and negotiated through the network by different practices of network actors. We suggest that further studies may use this notion of power to capture the more subtle power dynamics in public–nonprofit networks.

Third, we suggest that future research should focus on the role of trust. The analysis of network C clearly shows that a commissioner is able to create consensus in the network at the expense of participation of network actors.

Given these results we argue that a commissioner can only act in an effective way when the coordinating agency and coordinator receive a high level of trust from the network partners. We therefore argue that further analysis should focus on the role of trust for the performance of network governance (Gazley [2010](#); Saab et al. [2013](#)).

Furthermore, this paper focuses on the role of the network coordinator in establishing consensus among a large diversity of network actors in lead organization public–nonprofit networks. We suggest that further research should also focus on the extent to which consensus is established in networks with other types of network coordination such as shared-governed networks (Raeymaeckers and Kenis [2016](#)), networks governed by a steering group (Lindencrona et al. [2009](#)) or a network administrative organization (Provan and Kenis [2008](#)).

Finally, we suggest that future studies may follow Carboni ([2016](#)) and Schmid and Almog-Bar ([2016](#)) by focusing on partnerships between nonprofit, public actors and private businesses dealing with similar issues. Many authors state that especially in western welfare states the inclusion of private businesses in networks tackling societal issues is often considered as a very challenging step forward in building networks that will provide a responsive answer to the needs of vulnerable target groups (Bode et al. [2013](#); Henriksen et al. [2012](#)). We therefore hope that our article will inspire authors to further develop a research agenda on the specific governance challenges of networks consisting of a diverse set of actors (public, nonprofit and private) dealing with important but very ‘wicked’ societal issues.

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