

# **Network Governance and Democracy: Can Grassroots Participation Influence National Policy Orientation?**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is concerned with the potential of network governance to channel the transfer of ideas, relatively intact, from the grassroots into governing institutions. This is approached as a “test” of effective participatory democracy which, in the view of Huber et al, is a necessary antecedent to the accomplishment of social democratic ends through partisan politics. To explore the possible impact of interest mobilisation, organization and representation within civil society on welfare state restructuring, a single case study is explored in depth: a governance network for the development and implementation of a governmental policy for the recognition and support of community action in Quebec, Canada. In network governance, elected authorities turn to participatory democratic methods in order to increase the legitimacy of their decisions. But this strategy paradoxically holds the potential to thwart the achievement of their restructuring goals. The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyse the dynamics of network governance as a contradictory arena of interest intermediation, engaging elected authorities on the one hand, and newly legitimated civil society participants on the other. Taking a discursive institutionalist approach, the study highlights the roles played by the deployment of inter scalar and inter sectoral networking as well as asymmetrical discourse to – in this case – advance the effective transfer of relatively intact, radical and marginal ideas from the grassroots into government-wide policy.

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### **Introduction**

The new politics of the welfare state is concerned with the processes of restructuring under conditions of permanent austerity. The literature focuses mainly on how authorities succeed in shifting government policies in unpopular directions, and how this success is mitigated by institutional constraints. “Old politics” enters into the debate, but only in so far as defending the importance of formal, partisan politics. There has consequently been some neglect of the “old old” politics of interest mobilisation, organisation and representation in civil society – that is, participatory democracy – and its impact on welfare state restructuring. Huber et al (1999) have argued that participatory democracy is and has always been a necessary antecedent to the representation of social justice interests in the formal political arena. This is as much the case in the era of welfare state restructuring as it was in early welfare state development. Moreover, the weaker the representation of social justice interests and ideas within formal political parties today, the greater the importance of active, participatory democracy for advancing a social justice agenda. In this context, it is interesting that elected officials are increasingly turning to participatory democratic strategies to enhance their legitimacy, strategies that paradoxically hold the potential to thwart the achievement of their restructuring goals. The rise of network governance is one of the more prominent developments of this type. The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyse the dynamics of network governance as a contradictory arena of interest intermediation, engaging elected authorities on the one hand, and newly legitimated civil society participants on the other.

Network governance involves the inclusion of a range of government and civil society actors as co-participants in policy development and implementation. Civil society organisations and associations that were previously consigned to more or less dependent roles in the execution of social policy are now being drawn into more intensive negotiations amongst peers and authorities on broader issues throughout the policy cycle. Although these developments are seen to democratize the policy process in a context of deficient formal representation (Hirst, 2000; Fung and Wright, 2003; Boyte, 2005), many authors also warn that they pose a threat to the integrity of representative democracy, for example, by distancing decision-making processes from the scrutiny of democratically elected officials (Soerensen and Torfing, 2005, Bogason and Musso, 2006). Most conclude that the rules of metagovernance – or who participates in governance networks and under what conditions – need to be established and actively monitored by formally elected representatives, if network governance is to live up to its promise to enrich public policy development and implementation without abandoning it to special interests. This position assumes, however, that without such oversight, network governance can indeed be an effective vehicle for the transfer of the perspectives and ideas of civil society actors into the formal, political decision-making process. But is this the case?

Case studies almost unfailingly reveal that the process and outcome of network governance is disappointing and even deceptive for the weaker or marginal participants (Craig and Manthorpe, 1999; Craig et al, 2004; Casey and Dalton, 2006; Howard et al, 2006; Taylor, 2007). It seems almost impossible for local social actors to get beyond the structured relations of domination that favour authorities who have positional resources, both material and organisational, on their side. Participants in weaker positions are subject to manipulation, subordination, instrumentalization or, at the very best, are relegated to resistance. The mobilisation of institutional bias by authorities effectively operates as a means of reproducing relations of dominance in policy decision-making and of thwarting the effective transformative agency of challengers. The latter, for their part, typically lack the material and symbolic resources to push their projects forward against the perceived interests of authorities (North, 2000; Moulaert and Cabaret, 2006; Noy, 2009). Alternative ideas are thus kept in their place, that is, either integrated in some altered and benign form into the dominant discourse, or simply kept at the margins of legitimate discourse (Hercacleous, 2006).

Is effective participatory democracy a desirable feature of an institutionalized welfare state? Now-classic theories of welfare state development accord a leading role to partisan politics, or *representative* democracy in orienting political decision-making towards social justice, defined as the ideal of greater equality in social and economic welfare outcomes (Korpi, 1989; Huber et al, 1993; Korpi and Palme, 2003). But formal representative democracy is less likely to lean towards the promotion of social justice where subordinate classes are poorly represented in the party system or where their representation is insufficient to afford the political power necessary to influence and orient public policy. As Huber et al (1997) argue, the effectiveness of representative democracy to further the goals of social justice depends on the strength of participatory democracy, of which universal suffrage is but the minimum component. Participatory democracy includes “all forms of politically relevant mobilization as well as the effective translation of citizens’ demands into the political process via institutional channels such as political parties” (Huber et al, 1997:326). In the absence of participatory democracy, representation is plagued by democratic deficits, encouraging a spiral towards increasingly executive governance and public “apathy” or abstention. Yet studies of participatory democratic influence on welfare state governance in the context of restructuring are rare.

As an exploratory exercise, this paper will examine a case of network governance that challenges existing analyses in several ways. The case is concerned with the restructuring of state-civil society relations around issues of welfare and social development in Quebec, Canada, during the period of the rise of new public management.<sup>1</sup> It is not presented as a “typical” case, but rather as a case that allows for the exploration of a number of the important, complex dynamics that animate the relation between network governance and participatory democracy. It is not an example of a tightly circumscribed, local network, but rather a network involving inter scalar and inter sectoral articulations which, as much as metagovernance, form the structural framework within which governance relations and strategies unfold. The questions that we ask are, first, in network governance, are the weak relegated to subordination or, at best, resistance? And second, how can we define and account for “successful” or effective network governance with respect to participatory democracy?

The case study follows the establishment and operation of a governance network whose mandate is the development and implementation of a government policy for the recognition and support of community action, a policy that would apply to all government ministries and agencies in their dealings

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian provinces are constitutionally responsible for health, education, social welfare and cultural policy, though numerous arrangements with the federal government exist in these areas.

with community action groups in every sector (hereafter referred to as the policy). The analysis of the case is presented from an evolutionary perspective, on the assumption that both governance and democracy are *processes* that are transformed by agency over time and that relatively little can be learned from a snapshot at one point in time. A general analytic framework is provided by “discursive institutionalism” (Schmidt, 2008). While adhering to the tenets of the three more traditional institutionalisms (rational choice, sociological and historical, Hall and Taylor, 1996), discursive institutionalism takes “a more dynamic view of change, in which ideas and discourse overcome obstacles that the three more equilibrium-focused... institutionalisms posit as insurmountable” (Schmidt, 2008: 304). To this are added insights from the politics of scale (Agnew, 1997; Cox, 1998; Swyngedouw, 2000; Ghose, 2007;), which are particularly useful for grasping aspects of the relation between agency and structure.

The following section of the paper introduces the specific context of the case, and the one after will explore conceptual framework in more detail. In the next sections, the case study will be presented, followed by a discussion of the theoretical and empirical hypotheses that it suggests. These revolve around the limits of a social learning perspective to explain the effective transfer of marginal ideas into the heart of governance, and the potential of specific discursive strategies to raise the chances of successful, bottom-up influence on policy orientations.

### **Network governance in Quebec: from political culture to policy**

Skelcher et al (2006:2) argue that “advances in understanding the democratic anchorage of governance networks require carefully designed and contextually grounded empirical analysis, in which pertinent features of the context are carried through into theory building”. Some communities, societies and polities are more conducive to network governance than others, and Quebec is one of these. Political cultures include broad assumptions about legitimate ideologies, norms of political participation, and the structure of representation in the society (Mahon, 1977; Dufour, 2004). Due in large part to the salience of national identity in the political culture of this French-speaking Canadian province, the legitimacy of individual political expression associated with liberal, representative democracy, overlaps with a strong legitimacy accorded to collective representation as well. This may contribute in part to the province having the highest rate of unionization in North America (40%). It also accounts for other aspects of the province’s political culture and norms which combine to provide a context conducive to network governance.

Dufour (2004) has proposed six features of the structure of representation that efficiently describe the context in which network governance has emerged and developed in Quebec. The first of these is a 30-odd year tradition of *concertation*: collaboration amongst social actors and partners in view of a common goal or concern (Touzard, 2006). This is not to be confused with neo-corporatism since, with a few limited exceptions, it assigns no formal role or responsibilities to partners for policy development, governance or implementation. It is rather an informal consensus-building strategy that can take different forms, from sporadic “summits” orchestrated by government and bringing together business and labour, to self-organized roundtables and more formal federations established by local grassroots, community groups operating within a particular territory and sector, such as health or youth services, or even across sectors to tackle shared objectives.

A second, related feature is the prominence of such grassroots organizing within Quebec's civil society. A tradition born in the 1960's, parallel to the emergence of Québec's welfare state, it was at the time inspired by the community action movement in the US which mobilized citizens to collectively take their communities in hand, claim and defend their social rights, and demand government action on the social front. In Quebec, these groups gained some degree of legitimacy as they were broadly identified with the progressive forces behind welfare state development. They are notable for their capacity for hybrid community action, combining services with activism (Minkoff, 2002; Hasenfeld and Gidron, 2005). This capacity has been constructed through the formalization of their dense and overlapping networks of *concertation* and interest representation which are organised according to (a) their sector of activity, (b) their territory (cross- sector representation), and (c) the scale at the which their interests need to be represented, at both the regional to central levels. This capacity for self-representation reinforces their ability to act collectively and autonomously with respect to the government, despite their financial dependence on government.

But the influence of grassroots organisations should not be exaggerated. The third feature of the context in which network governance came to be favoured is the hierarchy of legitimate representation, in which it is not the grassroots but of course capital that takes precedence, followed more or less closely by labour, depending upon the party in power. The fourth feature is the existence of formal channels of interest representation, or participatory democracy, created by government, for example, in commissions of enquiry or consultations regarding policy proposals. These may attract hundreds of briefs presented by a wide variety of individual and collective civil society actors. However, there is typically no accountability to these processes; policies adopted in their aftermath might reflect positions opposed by the vast majority of participants. This leads to a fifth feature, which is the existence of *informal* channels of representation such as lobbying by interested parties both within and outside government. Informal channels are often made possible by the existence of allies amongst civil servants or politicians. While low in the hierarchy of influence, grassroots activists have access to allies in government as well, aided by a wave of government recruitment from the ranks of community organising in the 1970's.

Finally, the sixth contextual feature relates to what Bourdieu (1981) would call the "di-vision" of hegemonic political discourse in the province. Both neo-liberal and social democratic discourses are prominent in Quebec, though in this liberal welfare regime, both are more metaphorical than representative of real social policy arrangements. There is no social democratic party; while the sovereigntist party (PQ) harbours a social democratic faction, in the past, this faction had been embedded in the Liberal Party and was largely responsible for welfare state development during the 1960's. In many ways, Quebec is indeed the most "social democratic" jurisdiction in North America but, as Dufour (2004) points out, both principal parties are strong supporters of Quebec's competitive participation in a liberalized and globalized capitalist economy. At the same time, both need to respect – but do so to different degrees – a political-cultural legacy of Quebec's Catholic heritage which holds that there be legitimate spaces of social welfare where capitalist markets ought not to dominate. Thus, despite a dominant neo-liberal discourse and economic policies to match, Quebec has been a Canadian leader in decommodification (e.g. parental leave) and defamilization (e.g. childcare) to support labour market activation.

Quebec's welfare state developed during the 1960's and 1970's by means of highly centralized, "wall-to-wall" institutions and a substantial public sector to staff them. This ambitious model came under serious strain and suffered important cutbacks beginning in the early 1980's. Simultaneously, there was a rapid escalation in the number of grassroots organisations responding to the social needs of

working class communities ravaged by the recession and deindustrialization, accompanied by soaring unemployment and interest rates. Some had been receiving some funding from federal and provincial governments since the 1970's, but the overall level of funding of community-based organisations by the provincial government climbed steadily throughout the 1980's. By the beginning of the 1990's, faced with significantly eroding capacity, the Quebec government introduced its new "partnership" model of governance. The first salvo was associated with a reform of the health and social service sector in 1991, featuring deep budget cuts to health institutions. The reform also decentralized considerable planning and budget distribution powers to regional health and social service boards, with elected representation of all major institutions as well as citizens/ service users.

Much to their surprise, community organizations providing "alternative" health and social services were officially identified as "partners" in the reformed institutional network and were represented on the regional boards. Each board was required to develop regional service plans, beginning with the mental health sector (as a deinstitutionalization policy had recently been adopted). To do so, they were required to convene a committee in which three categories were to have equal representation : public psychiatric and mental health facilities, grassroots organizations offering alternative mental health services and ostensibly representing service users, and other relevant public institutions such as welfare agencies, police, school boards, etc. These committees were to produce, within a period of one year, regional service plans providing for a continuum of five types of mental health services within the community. It was this early experimentation with network governance, in which most community groups found themselves to be relatively helpless to intervene in an effective manner, that instigated much of the regional and national self-organization of community groups into sectoral and regional federations, as means of resisting instrumentalization and defending their interest. Thus, almost a decade before Tony Blair introduced local strategic partnerships in Britain, formal governance networks had emerged as a method of regional service planning in Quebec and community groups had begun to figure out how to work effectively in this context.

In 1995, in the midst of repeated recessions, the federal government initiated a downloading of public financing and service responsibilities to the provinces. At that time, vast majority of community organizations receiving funding from the Quebec government were operating in the broad field of health and social services. But others were emerging, geared more towards employability and job creation, in the context of the transfer of responsibility for active labour market measures from the federal to the Quebec government. For example, the number of Community Development Corporations more than tripled between 1995 and 1998; social enterprises, designed to provide jobs for the hard to employ in such emerging sectors as homecare and recycling, were multiplying; Youth Job Junctions were being established in every community; and many other grassroots organizations were developing expertise in helping people with specific obstacles to employment, such as physical handicaps or lack of experience, to prepare for the labour market, and find and retain jobs. Many of these organizations emerged from the same community action movement that included groups in the health and social service field, as well as popular education and social rights groups. But this new generation of community organizations did not share the relation of "contentious collaboration" with government that had been gradually constructed in the health and social service field over the previous decade. Many of them were contracted by the new Ministry of Employment and Social Solidarity to implement its array of active labour market measures.

This was the general context in which the Quebec Premier's office announced, in March 1995, his intention to establish a global partnership framework with community groups, including an official policy for the recognition and support of community action. Although, in the wake of earlier experiences,

many community groups had been demanding that the government establish just such a policy, the announcement came as a surprise and their reception of the news was mixed. Many harboured considerable doubt that the government had in mind the sort of policy that some of them were seeking. The story of the governance network for the development and implementation of this policy begins at this point. But before telling it, the next section will present the conceptual framework for the case study.

### **Agency, structure and discourse**

Governance networks are relatively stable and institutionalized processes of public policy deliberation, decision and implementation, involving a web of relationships amongst government, market and civil society actors (Klijn and Skelcher, 2007). They are distinguishable from policy networks by their broader and longer term mandates and formal rules of engagement. They go beyond a set of experts with varied interests and types of knowledge who contribute in different ways to the development of a specific policy. Governance networks consist instead in formally constituted arrangements, whereby public agencies or authorities on the one hand, and networks of relevant civil society interests on the other, collaborate throughout the policy cycle on developing and implementing solutions to a specific set of problems. Although *local* governance has been the subject of most empirical work on governance networks, a local focus belies the true complexity of these networks, which are generally structured through action on a number of scales. Thus, for example, the dynamics of regional health and social service planning committees in Quebec at the beginning of the 1990's resulted from tensions amongst regional authorities, whose mandate it was to establish the committees; local grassroots organizations who were invited to delegate participants in the deliberations; and the central Ministry of Health and Social Services which had set the rules of metagovernance, including what was to be achieved by whom and by when. Many authors analytically (or, in some cases, normatively) distinguish metagovernance from governance networks per se. This is not a particularly useful strategy, as relations of scale are an intrinsic characteristic of the dynamics of network governance.

Governance networks are also often spaces of cross-sector connection. Different sectors of activity (such as mental health, housing and employment) are typically brought together to work on an intersectoral issue, or one that engages multiple sectors. Moreover, each sector is itself scaled and not always in ways that correspond to the structure of other sectors. This adds another source of tension in governance networks when, for example, a Ministry is regionalized but community-based groups organize themselves only on a local level; or a centralized ministry collaborates with a decentralized ministry to jointly work out the rules of partnership with local community groups. The more varied the scalar and sectoral articulations within governance networks, the greater the opportunity for interfering with the dominant hierarchical structure.

The concept of scale, while itself hierarchical, does not take for granted hierarchical power relations. This is precisely because the vertical or nested relations between different scales of action are typically shot through with horizontal cross-sector relations that interact with and alter vertical power relations. Thus, a "common front" community-based groups can pose a significant political constraint for government authorities that depend on them for public service delivery. Relations of scale and sector are therefore central to the study of governance networks. Much of the geographic literature on scale stresses the social construction of scale, and this is illustrated in the dense, overlapping self-organization of community groups in Quebec. In this paper, the deployment of relations of scale and sector as power resources is also significant.

By characterizing governance networks as multi scale and multi sector spaces of engagement, agency is made to foreground structure. Ghose (2007) contrasts these spaces to the predominantly local space of everyday practice where institutionalized relations of dependence tend to be reproduced – what she (and Cox, 1998) refer to as “spaces of dependence”. In contrast, by investing in “spaces of engagement”, sites located not only beyond the local, but at the interface of numerous other networks spanning different scales and sectors of action, the potential for transformative agency on all sides mounts. Indeed, this is ostensibly what makes governance networks attractive to governments : they increase the potential for collaborative, efficient and innovative agency. But participation in such spaces of engagement can involve a “counter-hegemonic” project of “mixing things up”, of path-bending practice, of disturbing the everyday, indeed, of intervening in the rules of the game and transforming practice.

Collective agency depends, however, on the formulation of a project (Gough, 2004). A project is defined here as a system of sense-making (Weik et al, 2005), both cognitive and normative, that does not remain unarticulated (as may be the case with a paradigm) but is brought into the foreground of discursive interaction and provides meaning and an objective. In the absence of a project for any given participant, network governance is reduced to an exercise in dependent participation, where others have established not only the rules but also, the object of collaboration. To the extent that the development of a governance network represents the project of only a single actor or coalition of actors, it will be characterized by dependent participation by the others. Where multiple actors each bring their own projects to the table, engagement and change are at least a possibility.

The focus on agency here is not to forget that governance network processes and outcomes are structured, though not determined, by institutionalised interests and power differentials. Indeed, the approach taken here adheres to the major tenets of the “three institutionalisms” : historically sedimented practices and the legacies of previous decisions inevitably constrain and orient the current range of options; cognitive paradigms and the normative order leave certain ideas entirely outside actors’ horizons or else situate them beyond the pale of legitimacy; and finally, the institutionalized hierarchy of interests encourages powerful resistance to change. These approaches accept that institutions are not only stable sets of material practices, but also, discursive practices. A fourth institutionalism – discursive institutionalism (Béland, 2005; Phillips et al, 2004; Schmidt, 2008) – theorizes more fully the nature and roles of discursive practices as constitutive of institutions, their reproduction and their transformation. Discursive institutionalism takes seriously not only ideas as both representations and prescriptions, but also, the relations between them and the interactive processes or communicative logics through which they are constructed and conveyed. In short, ideas don’t just circulate in institutional settings, but through their communication, structure those settings. For example, a coordinative logic of communication aiming for the achievement of consensus will structure a governance network differently over time than a competitive logic, geared to ensuring the success of one or another project.

Typically, the discursive structuring of institutions is a background process. It operates at the level of normative assumptions and paradigmatic thinking which can be detected, through discourse analysis, in language, documents and symbolic communications. But when institutional arrangements themselves are brought into the foreground (including metagovernance in the case of governance networks), they become subject to discursive restructuring through various strategies such as deliberation, persuasion, negotiation, reframing, renaming and ambiguity. Discursive asymmetry can facilitate institutional restructuring, and compensate for material asymmetries. This occurs, for example, when what is

foreground and the object of discursive work for one actor, remains in the background – unattended to – for another. For example, when there appears to be an unspoken consensus about policy objectives, and only programmatic questions are on the table, the strategic introduction of a paradigm-bending idea can sometimes go unnoticed and be integrated without serious challenge.

Discursive asymmetry is a question of agency and may compensate for, or even counter material and other positional asymmetries. It is thus an essential strategic for weaker partners in governance networks or, put another way, an essential strategy of participatory democracy. Participatory democracy is sometimes defined as a formal process orchestrated by government (consultations, citizens' juries, consensus conferences, etc.) and based on a coordinative logic seeking consensus (Andersen and Jaeger, 1999). The contrary position taken here is that participatory democracy is built on the self-organization of civil society and on a competitive logic of mobilization, seeking success for a specific project that is perceived to meet the interests of those not otherwise well-represented in the political realm (Johnson, 1991).

Participatory democracy is therefore important not only as process (providing input legitimacy) but also, as a carrier of ideas otherwise excluded from, or marginal to, the arena of formal representative democracy. The effective transfer of ideas from the discursive periphery into the institutional core is contingent mainly on agency, by which ideas may penetrate institutional boundaries and even find their way into background discourse. Network governance, at least theoretically, is a key process by which this sort of agency can effectively be practiced. It creates opportunities for communicative interaction between actors at the bottom and the top as well as for cross-sector learning and alliances. Moreover, once an idea penetrates a multi scale, multi sector institution such as central government, it can be diffused outward and down again, through the ranks of multiple sectors, to the local level. The density and type of inter scalar and inter sectoral articulations matter to the effectiveness of network governance, and the literature on the politics of scale teaches that these articulations can be strategically constructed and deployed (Swyngedouw, 2000).

### **A governance network for the purpose of framing government – community group relations**

The case study that will be presented in this paper illustrates many of the processes of network governance discussed here as well as their contingent outcomes. It tells the story of the complex web of network governance concerned with the restructuring of state-civil society relations in the Canadian province of Quebec, from the 1990's to the present. The network consists in the following broadly defined collective actors, keeping in mind that none are homogeneous and, moreover, each is embedded in a web of other networks.

- The self-organized "**autonomous community action**" (**ACA**) **movement**, also referred to as the community sector. Its base consists in approximately 8000 grassroots groups representing about 20 different sectors of community action, from housing, youth and mental health services to environmental, consumer and refugee aid groups. In this story, it will be largely represented by the "RQ-ACA" (Quebec network for autonomous community action, formerly the "advisory committee"), a federation of regional multi-sector and national single-sector federations of community groups.

- The **social economy network**, whose representatives usually define it as including cooperatives, other collective or social enterprises, as well as autonomous community action groups. In this story, it is represented by the “Chantier “ or the Working Group on the Social Economy. The Chantier merits its own story as a governance network but in the story told here, it serves as a foil.
- The **Secretariat for Autonomous Community Action (SAC A)**, a government administrative body within the Ministry of Employment and Social Solidarity, with both formal and informal ties to the civil society actors mentioned above, though, as its name suggests, particularly to the first.
- “**The government**”, represented in this case by interministerial committees of varying configurations over time. The most prominent the Interministerial Committee for Community Action (ICCA), to which the SACA served as secretariat. At times, the ministers themselves sat on these committees but at other times, the committees consisted in public service directors or professionals from the various ministries involved. It also includes certain decision-makers, including the Premier of Quebec (the effective head of government); the minister in charge of the community action dossier, a post that existed from 1995 to 2001; and less directly, the Cabinet and the National Assembly.

The case study reveals two principal logics of communication that coexist within the governance network. The first is the logic of **concertation**. It represents the paradigmatic logic of interscale and inter sectoral communication developed since the 1970’s by the Quebec government, with its social partners. But the logic of *concertation* has also structured the emergence of self-organized networks within civil society. Recall that *concertation* refers to the construction of networks for purposes of coordinating or collaborating in view of shared objectives and is essentially a coordinative logic. Achieving consensus is the foreground objective, while the content of that consensus often remains in the background, cognitively bounded by the paradigm within which the actors operate.

The second logic of communication is that of **contentious collaboration**. This corresponds to placing differences over values, objectives, rules and the distribution of material resources in the foreground in all situations of collaboration. It is a competitive discourse aimed at curtailing the pull towards consensus, in order to maintain an autonomous position and to be able to fight for it. Social learning theory generally posits that marginal discourses that are framed obtrusively, challenge the assumptions of the dominant discourse and offer no possibility of assimilation are likely to remain marginal (Jobert, 1989; Heracleous, 2006). Contentious collaboration is the logic behind – in fact, in some ways, the project of –the ACA movement.

Discourse theory says that change occurs when challengers are relatively unobtrusive and manage to frame their alternative ideas as though falling within the dominant paradigm. A third logic, which we might term a **progressive** logic of communication that we attribute to the social economy network, seems to fit this image. It is oriented towards creating bridges between discourses by arguing that they all share a common, progressive objective. Differences are reduced to the specific contributions that each actor has to make towards the common goal. This logic will borrow vocabulary from a variety other discourses to frame its own and to highlight their compatibility. Contrary to the expectations of discourse theory, this logic does not always come out as a winning one, at least, not on the terms that this paper puts forward for “success”, i.e. enhancing the chances of *effective* participatory democracy.

The case study will be presented following a process grid based on Hensman’s (2003) evolutionary model of discursive restructuring in institutional fields. He posits five stages, beginning with (1) the antecedents, or the opportunity structure, which present an “institutional void” that various stakeholders wish to control. This gives way to a period during which (2) competing identities, or projects, are crystallized and defended. The struggle to ensure that the governance network take up

one project as opposed to others, results in (3) an initial settlement on one project that the principal stakeholders accept as the most likely to form the basis for successful institutionalization. This may occur because some have been persuaded by new, challenging ideas (“social learning”) or simply because they have been negotiated into a corner that refocuses their assessment of their best interests (“social pressure”) (Checkel, 2001). The test of the resilience of the selected project, however, occurs during stage (4) when it must be disseminated throughout the institutional field, both horizontally and vertically: will it fly? Does it gain the required legitimacy to evolve into common practice? If so, then this project may become (5) institutionalized, or stabilized throughout the field. As stages in a contingent process, each one presents the possibility of a shift in the relative position of various dominant and challenging projects.<sup>2</sup>

### Stage 1: The opportunity structure

In 1995, there were about 8000 community action groups in Québec and nearly 5000 were receiving funding from the government: in the health and social service sector alone the number had reached close to 3,500, and the rest were being financed by as many as 20 different government ministries or agencies. This was indicative, in this small society (population 7.5 million), of the extent to which these groups contributed to state capacity and legitimacy, particularly during an era of high unemployment, rising poverty, federal downloading and public service cutbacks. Although the government was the principal funder of a majority of these organizations, the relationship with them was a contentious one. If the organizations in the field of employment and economic development were not as well organized to look after their interests as those in the health and social service field, many were none the less frustrated with their own relation to government, making contract negotiations in some cases an arduous affair. Different relations and practices were emerging over time with little coordination amongst them.

There were a series of clear indications that the government was interested in a more broad “partnership” with the community sector. The Minister of Employment and Social Solidarity had recently expounded on “a new form of social organization”, based on innovative community action, and concluded that it was “essential that the state provide them all the support they need” (Blackburn, 1995: 169). The Premier had hired a special advisor on community action and his office announced that a minister would soon be assigned to take charge of the community action dossier. He also announced the creation of a Secretariat for Community Action (SAC), to ensure “more direct access by the community sector to the government”, and also, to “respond to the government’s need to be better informed on the concerns and needs of the community organisations” (Leclerc, 1995: 26). The secretariat was to encourage *concertation* between all the different ministries and the organisations that contributed to their areas of responsibility, and to support innovative projects, particularly through a new Community Action Fund that would be created for the purpose. Most significantly, amongst the mandates of the Secretariat was “to elaborate a global policy of government support for community action in a spirit of decentralisation”. According to the Premier’s spokesperson, the “official character” of such a policy would “give real credibility” to this sector at the governmental level (Leclerc, 1995).

Here was a space, then, characterized by a high degree of interdependence and a low level of institutionalization. The Premier’s announcement had indicated that these conditions were to change, that it was about to become more actively involved in the future of the community sector. The sector itself had not been informed in advance of these announcements, which were interpreted as both an

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<sup>2</sup> In the telling of the story in this version of the paper, the 5<sup>th</sup> stage will be truncated because an expected government publication, expected for March 2009, had not yet been finalized at the time of this writing.

invitation and particularly, a risk. At this point, the notion of network governance had not yet been introduced. Most importantly, it was not clear that the Premier's office had an intimate understanding of the contours and dynamics of the community action movement. But the announcement of impending institutionalization was not lost on community action leaders.

## **Stage 2: Identity politics and competing projects**

The shaking out of identities, the honing of projects and the discursive engagement of principal actors around the development of a policy for the recognition and support of community action are interrelated processes that unfolded over a period of about five years. This part of the story will be told in three phases. In the first, distinctions are drawn between three different projects, actors and strategies. In the second, these projects are articulated and the strategies engaged according to different logics of communication. In fact, only two remain engaged in the development of the policy, the third rather quickly seeking its legitimacy elsewhere and by different means. In the final phase, however, this third discourse makes a brief reappearance, incorporated into the government's own policy project which was to be revealed for the first time only in 1999.

### ***Establishing identities: The socio-economic summit (1996)***

Following the government's 1995 announcements about its intentions regarding community action, the community action movement itself quickly mobilized its multiple networks in different sectors and at different scales in order to develop a coherent reaction to the government's advancing agenda. This agenda could be interpreted both as a positive government response to demands that had been made by the movement itself, and as the harbinger of a new era of government instrumentalisation of the sector. Recognizing the imperative to retain control over the interpretation of their own demand, a delegation from the movement made representations to the Premier's office to change the name of the new Secretariat. By renaming it the Secretariat for *autonomous* community action (SACA), the government could assure the movement that its intent, and that of the impending policy, was to recognize community organizations for their own missions, and not to harness them to government programmes as was already underway in a number of sectors. Rather than lose his prospective partners at the starting gate, the Premier agreed to this change.

Later in the same year, the Quebec women's movement, in conjunction with the community movement, staged massive anti-poverty demonstration in front of the National Assembly. One of the outcomes of this now-iconic March for Bread and Roses was an invitation from the Premier's office to the organizers, to participate as formal partners, alongside labour and business, in a national socioeconomic summit planned for the next year. The Premier's office provided a budget for an Orientation Committee in which the organizers would be joined by representatives of regional women's caucuses and four government ministries. The document this committee produced reiterated the discourse delivered at the March for Bread and Roses, articulating the demand for quality jobs in social infrastructure organisations that would answer to needs defined by communities. (David and Marcoux, 1995; Comité d'orientation, 1996). Rather than ratify this document, the Premier's office constituted a new committee, the Working Group on the Social Economy (hereafter called the *Chantier*), with a more diverse membership and a more specific mandate.<sup>3</sup> The original coalition of women's organisations and grassroots organizations were still represented, along with representatives of the labour movement, the cooperative movement, cultural and social organizations, as well as representatives of the business

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<sup>3</sup> [www.chantier.qc.ca](http://www.chantier.qc.ca)

sector. The *Chantier* came up with a document (Chantier, 1996) that was eventually tabled at the summit. Though touted as the project of the civil society delegation, in fact it represented a significant compromise between, on the one hand, the project initially formulated by the organizing committee of the March for Bread and Roses and reiterated by the Comité d'orientation, and on the other hand, the Premier's own interpretation of how that project might be of interest to his own.

The Premier's own project for the socioeconomic summit was symbolized by its principal objective of achieving consensus on a "zero deficit" policy. The summit had been organized to procure agreement amongst social partners about priorities in face of the longstanding socioeconomic crisis. His call was for a comprehensive "new social pact" regarding the need to rapidly reverse and resolve the fiscal crisis, as the key to freeing up spending for the social front. As an international indicator of the health of economy, "zero deficit" would benefit Quebec's competitiveness in the global market. This in turn would stem the further loss of jobs and indeed, create new ones in emerging sectors. By bringing debt charges under control, it would free up tax revenues that could better be spent on social and economic development. This project was designed to rally business and labour, as well as those previously marginalized social forces represented for the first time at such a summit, the civil society delegation.

While labour was somewhat cool to the government's project, it was the new "social partner" that formulated, not one, but two counter projects. The first was presented in the document tabled by the Chantier. Its tone could be summed up in its title, *Let's Dare... Solidarity* (Chantier, 1996) an echo of the premier's slogan for the summit: *Let's dare!* Its principal theme was that "we need to do things differently". Focusing on economic and social development beyond both market and state, it paid tribute to supple, local and regional initiatives relying on "individual and collective responsibility". It maintained that "ineffective social policies undermine citizens' confidence in public institutions". Instead, "inefficient" government employability programmes should give way to "quality jobs", respecting the labour code, in non-profit enterprises that produce socially useful goods and services (Chantier, 1996). Working within the constraints of the Premier's mandate, the Chantier produced inspiring examples of social economy initiatives that would require no new public spending. It put out new ideas for their financing, for example, by shifting part of budget currently allocated to traditional employability programmes to social economy jobs instead, and by promoting PPPs (though not called that) to create financial instruments appropriate to the social economy. Labour and business were not entirely opposed to this project but each held serious reservations regarding, for example, the risk of replacing high quality, unionized jobs in the public sector by low paying, precarious jobs in the social economy.

A second, less formal and more contentious proposal from the civil society delegation at the summit was expressed as a simple retort to the premier's "zero deficit" challenge: "zero poverty!". With some support from unions, the civil society contingent proposed that a clause be added to the agreement coming out of the summit, committing the government to "zero impoverishment of the lowest income quintile". In effect, this would mean a pledge to no further cuts to social assistance benefits. The government, however, refused to endorse the "zero poverty" clause. Its sole concession to the civil society delegation was to take up a suggestion from the Chantier, that unions, business and government all contribute to create fund to finance job creation in the social economy. This became a *Fund to fight poverty through labour market reintegration*. The formulation revealed a reinterpretation of the Chantier's project, from the creation of an investment fund for job creation, to a fund for moving people off welfare and into the labour market. As framed, the fund relegated the social economy to marginality, an economy for the poor and excluded. In the face of this and the refusal to integrate the "zero

poverty” clause despite widespread support, a large portion of the civil society contingent walked out of the summit.

The summit finally came to a weak consensus on the basis of the government’s project, including “zero deficit”, the *Fund to fight poverty through labour market reintegration*, and a re-commitment to the development of a policy to recognize and support community action. However, a “successful” *concertation* had been stolen from the Premier when the community action groups “slammed the door” behind them as they left. From their point of view, the government’s position had left only way to interpret the intent behind its offer of partnership: “social dumping”. The transformation of the *meaning* of the March for Bread and Roses into a social economy discourse was, they argued, a strategy to harness the community sector to the government’s zero-deficit objective, and placed responsibility for unemployment on the victim’s shoulders by prioritizing “employability” as the solution to poverty. Thus, they also disavowed the position represented by the Chantier. Those community delegates that remained in the room seemed to signal an acceptance of the premise that economic development could be built by shifting the responsibility to individuals, including the poorest victims of economic restructuring. The abandonment of the summit by the ACA movement announced its critical, contentious positioning in the debate that had irrupted there. Those delegates of the civil society contingent that supported the social economy project, and remained in the room, were bitterly looked upon as having broken solidarity with the movement in favour of a pragmatic *concertation* with government, unions and business.

But for its part, the social economy network had been accorded recognition and gained a first hint of legitimacy without having alienated possible, powerful allies. It had also gained a two-year continuance of its mandate from government, during which it would hone its own, alternative, progressive project and prove its capacity to deliver on promises. It would also attempt to better represent its project to government, unions and business, as well as the rest of the community movement with which it still shared a discourse of solidarity, democratic participation and social transformation. It was on the basis of this commitment to a progressive strategy of inclusive *concertation* combined with persuasion, as opposed to the isolation and critical confrontation exemplified by the ACA movement, that the emerging social economy network staked the growth of its legitimacy and the advancement of its own project. However, this third project was not to compete with an eventual ACA project to control the partnership agenda, at least as far as the policy for the recognition and support of community action was concerned. The social economy network turned instead to selling its project to potential investors in social enterprise with whom it could advance its development plans.

### ***Discursive engagement: identities, frames and interaction strategies***

By the time of the socioeconomic summit in 1996, a series of meetings of ACA federations at the regional level had already taken place to define the issues of the impending policy for the recognition and support of community action, from the grassroots perspective. Having initially “reached up” when it quickly secured a name change for the SACA, movement leadership had since reached down. These strategies were facilitated by the existing centralized, regionalized, cross-sector self-organization of the community action phenomenon in Quebec, developed over two decades of interfacing with government. The understandings coming out these grassroots meetings underpinned the “zero poverty” demand and the walk-out at the summit. The regional consultations culminated, close on the heels of the socioeconomic summit, in a national-level “estates general”, or general assembly of the ACA

movement. At this meeting, a “provisional advisory committee” (hereafter the RQ-ACA<sup>4</sup>) was established with a mandate to position the movement within the policy development process. The estates general also produced a position paper, an initial “global recommendation” regarding the impending government policy (RQ-ACA, 1996).

The “global recommendation” established the rules for democratic representation in the RQ-ACA from 20 national single-sector federations and regional and national multi sector federations, ratifying its role as the voice of the movement on issues related to the policy. It identified the ACA movement with the values of social justice, solidarity and equality, anti-globalisation<sup>5</sup> and diversity. It reiterated its “refusal of partnership” with a government “bent on downloading its responsibilities to the community sector”. It argued that government recognition was meaningless if not accompanied by reasonable financing of community-based services (“at a minimum, 1% of the government budget...”). Its view of the SACA was that it should play the role of champion of community action within the government. A significant section of the document dealt with the ACA movement’s vision of the role of the state. It was imperative that it maintain its public responsibilities (public services, redistribution...), but it did not act alone in the public sphere. Community action, the movement maintained, constituted a significant component of *public* action, and it was therefore the responsibility of government to support citizen engagement and participatory democracy (RQ-ACA, 1996).

The government’s discourse with respect to its position on community action was somewhat less well articulated at this time. The idea of a policy that would streamline government’s interaction with the community-based service sector seemed to serve both capacity and legitimacy enhancing goals of the government and held promise to better coordinate all the “progressive forces” of the society towards the accomplishment of shared objectives. Its strategy was to ignore the political rhetoric of the RQ-ACA, and stay on track on with its own project of coordination and *concertation*. Therefore, when the minister responsible for the community action dossier received the RQ-ACA’s “global recommendations” in December 1996, she offered no official response. Several months later, after deliberations at the cabinet level, an interministerial committee was formed with a mandate to move the policy-making process forward. The cabinet officially confirmed an advisory role for the RQ-ACA, but did not offer any official feedback on its “global recommendations”. Rather, relations with the RQ-ACA were turned over to the SACA. The SACA in turn diligently fostered collaboration with this advisory committee as it began to construct various policy instruments, in conjunction with the new interministerial committee for community action. Network governance was now in operation, though no formal governance network existed.

Between 1996 and 1998, the RQ published a series of syntheses of its global position regarding the impending policy, covering every issue it deemed important (RQ-ACA, 1996a, 1996b, 1998b, 1998c). In contrast to this competitive discursive strategy, the government had adopted an entirely pragmatic one, relying on the tradition of *concertation*. This asymmetrical discursive interaction was a source of serious tension from the start. One year after the submission of the RQ’s first “global recommendation”, there had been no counter proposal. Instead, the interministerial committee had completed a review of all current government relations with community groups and had submitted a strategic plan for policy

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<sup>4</sup> Réseau québécois de l’action communautaire autonome. It was in fact originally incorporated under the name of « the advisory committee on autonomous community action » and adopted its current name only in 2008. [www.comavis-aca.org/index.htm](http://www.comavis-aca.org/index.htm). For a history of the organization, see Sotomayor and Lacombe, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> This referred to a globalization that consolidated world capital at the expense of local communities and populations. Note that the concept of “alter-globalization” had not yet gained currency.

development. The first step of its plan was a consultation with the community milieu (which numbered about 8000 groups). This was interpreted by the RQ as challenging the legitimacy of its recognition as official representative of autonomous community action for purposes of the policy (its members represented about 4000 groups). It called another general assembly to decide whether to accept the government's strategic plan and continue its collaboration. As the RQ interpreted the government's "redundant" consultation with community groups as time-wasting, so government actors interpreted the RQ's extensive consultation with membership as time-wasting. The RQ requested another meeting with the minister. During that meeting, in May 1998, the Minister once again reinforced the RQ's legitimacy by agreeing to establish a joint steering committee, consisting of the interministerial committee and the advisory committee. This represented the official constitution of the governance network for the development of the policy to recognize and support community action (RQ-ACA, 1998a).

It was not to have a significant impact on the unfolding of the policy development process. The RQ-ACA maintained its identity-building, competitive strategies and still, there was no counter project for the policy coming from government. Between 1996 and 1998, it organized numerous meetings at local, regional and central levels, which produced several reiterations of its position, in the form of "Principals" (RQ-ACA, 1996b) and "Declarations" (RQ-ACA, 1998b, 1998c). During an election campaign (which returned the same party to power), the RQ-ACA requested and published information from each of the political parties about their positions regarding the role of community action in Quebec; it published an op-ed piece in two newspapers on the plight of community groups, the issues they faced and their significance for the society as a whole. It mobilized a demonstration, and requested a third meeting with the (new) minister in charge of the dossier. During this meeting in early 1999, the ACA delegates were assured once again that the government intended to respect the community movement's principal concerns: its self-identity and its autonomy and the protection of organizations' own missions, orientations and practices from potentially punitive funding practices. The minister later confirmed in writing that "autonomous community action" would indeed be "at the heart of the policy" (RQ-ACA, 1999). Government thus remained in its coordinative, consensus-building mode of discourse in which, rather than engage the RQ-ACA on questions of meaning, value, principle or goals, it relied on its ability to "absorb" the ACA discourse.

Still having had no global counter-proposal from the government, almost two years into the policy development period, the RQ-ACA held another general assembly at which opinion on the value of continuing participation in the policy development process – indeed, on the desirability of such a policy in the first place – was divided. Some believed it was not appropriate for the ACA movement to participate in the development of this government policy, that the movement did not require government's "recognition". It should remain steadfastly self-organizing and confront the policy as required once it was adopted by government. Others believed that the movement could not afford to turn its back on the opportunity to effectively influence the content of the policy, despite the risk of failure. The policy would exist, perhaps they could make it meet their interests and if not, they would still have the capacity to confront it with strategies of resistance. To still other community groups, outside the membership of the RQ-ACA, the strategic positioning of the ACA movement amounted to embracing traditional ideological stances of the 1970's. In contrast, for example, the social economy network depicted itself as future-oriented, innovative and "ambitious", less concerned with protecting its position than with participating in progress. A quotation pointedly introduces one of its own strategic positioning documents: "Social movements are easily able to mobilize solidarity on the basis of resistance. The real test of solidarity comes when we need to collectively innovate" (Chantier, 2001: i).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The author is identified as Ricardo Petrella, but no reference is provided.

As for the government, while seemingly refused to engage with the ACA movement on its terms, it was moving ahead at this time on its own integrated agenda of decentralization, social assistance reform and labour market activation, all of which contributed in some way to the continued development of the social economy. But by now, the official definition of “social economy” had become much narrower than originally envisioned by the Chantier and its development was framed in increasingly market-oriented terms (D’Amours, 2000). For example, to be eligible for government funding, not only did social enterprises have to engage in commercial activities and charge fees, but also had to demonstrate their eventual economic viability through the production of a business plan. From the perspective of the ACA movement, the expansion and evolution of the social economy was taken as evidence of the government’s own, as yet unarticulated paradigm of recognition and support for community action.

In this context, the ACA position became ever more resistant. For example, it came out against the realignment of current funding structures in conformity with the government’s decentralization and regionalization policies (RQ-ACA, 1998c). In its view, decentralization was a strategy to hold local communities responsible for cleaning up global messes. Moreover, it was a strategy for drawing community organizations into local service plans that tied them to public programmes and robbed them of their autonomy and alternative character. In all these respects, the ACA movement removed itself further and further from the general orientation of the restructuring of Quebec’s welfare state.

### ***The government’s policy project (December 1999)***

Only at the end of 1999 did the government finally deliver its own draft policy for the recognition and support of community action to the RQ-ACA (SACA, 2000). The minister had conveyed a number of belated directives to the steering committee earlier that year. These “new” principles did not reflect the understanding that the RQ-ACA thought it had on the central principals of the policy. It replied to the minister in writing, reminding him of former engagements, both verbal and written, and then adopted a “wait and see” strategy. The official policy proposal was therefore drafted without further input from the RQ-ACA and submitted several months later (RQ-ACA, 1999).

The proposal was entitled “*The Community Milieu: An Essential Actor in Quebec’s Development*”. In the minister’s introduction, he affirms that “the rise and dissemination of community action inspires the government’s vision of *public service renewal*” (italics added). The proposal then asserts the responsibility of the government to set priorities and assure the quality of “its” interventions. Thus, in the press release that accompanied the submission of the draft policy to the National Assembly, the minister states that “considering the sums invested” (in community organisations), we hope to see greater coherence in our (sic) interventions”. The policy discourse is otherwise consistent with the government’s view of what is valuable in community action: the quality of its services; its expertise in specialized areas of intervention; its “major, indeed, unprecedented contribution to the labour market integration of people at risk of long-term unemployment”; and in general, its contribution to “changes that the government wishes to undertake in the delivery of public services and in the economic situation”. It also reinforces the government’s decentralization agenda – “a fundamental orientation of the Québec government” – promising to delegate the distribution of certain community action funds to regional and local authorities. In numerous ways, then, the draft policy opposed positions taken by the RQ-ACA and confirmed the movement’s fears of instrumentalisation, or the tying of community organisations to the production of services in the framework of government policies and programmes (SACA, 2000).

The ACA discourse, so often reiterated over the previous four years, was not totally ignored, however. The government's draft policy acknowledges community action in Québec as a "movement". The description of ACA remains true to the terms provided by the RQ-ACA itself, in its own documents, but is relegated to an appendix. The proposal is instead explicitly oriented to the recognition of "community action in a general sense" (SACA, 2000). Included in this concept is ACA, social enterprises, voluntary organisations as well as other non-profits, some of which are up by the public institutions for the provision of services. Although the autonomy of all community organizations is to be respected (in terms again provided by the RQ-ACA itself), the policy creates a tightly structured partnership framework that ties government funding of organizations to the missions of its various ministries.

This would seem to corroborate the hypothesis of the truly marginal discourse inevitably remaining marginal. Over a period of four years, the government had bracketed the RQ-ACA's political rhetoric and concentrated instead on its own goal of arriving at a pragmatic consensus. Thus, the proposal very closely reflected the relation it had managed to establish with the social economy network over the previous four years. Discourse theory would predict that the social economy model would be integrated into the government's own development paradigm and that the most that the ACA movement could expect would be the framing of some marginal elements of the policy in ACA terms. This was in fact the form taken by the government's draft policy. But in this case, the draft policy did not achieve the status of a "settlement", or even an imposed "compromise", that would put an end to competing identities and projects.

The RQ-ACA responded to the policy proposal in the form of a brief to the minister (RQ-ACA, 2000a). Strategically directing its remarks to "the party" rather than "the government", it accused the PQ of "going back on its word, given many times over the last 4 years, both verbally and in writing", particularly regarding the "the specificity of ACA". It called for recognition to be given not for the services offered, but on the basis of the ACA movement's roles as "critical social innovators" engaged in "social transformation, the exercise of democracy and citizenship". It assessed the proposal as being concerned essentially with establishing a "partnership framework" in which "government's objectives were the priority". On the other hand, the RQ-ACA admitted to satisfaction with some aspects of the proposed funding arrangements. If the government was willing to "negotiate significant changes" "in good faith", and allow sufficient time for consultation with the grassroots, then the proposal could serve as a starting point for further discussions.

The government, in response, promptly submitted the proposal to the National Assembly (a "precipitous move", in the words of the RQ-ACA, and publicly denounced by it) and announced a province-wide consultation, the conditions of which had previously been planned in collaboration with the RQ. But in this manner, any negotiations with the RQ-ACA were again circumvented.

### **Stage 3: Constructing a consensual discourse**

The settlement between the government's proposal and the still-intact ACA project was finally to play out during the consultation period and in the months following. The chair of the consultation committee was to receive almost 600 briefs, mainly from community organisations but also, from unions, public social service agencies, regional and local development councils, government advisory councils, university researchers, school boards, municipalities... and over 1,500 people signed up to participate in the audiences held in each of the 17 administrative regions of the province. Furthermore,

the media coverage was extensive. The issues at stake captured the imagination of a good portion of the society, and more specifically, the traditional power base of the PQ.

The final report of the consultation committee (Larose, 2000) was characterized three different takes on the policy proposal: outright rejection, rejection unless substantially revised, and acceptance with modifications. On the basis of his reading of the briefs and transcripts of the audiences, the chair of the committee made 28 recommendations, of which approximately half were eventually integrated into the final policy.<sup>7</sup> The modifications were negotiated with the RQ-ACA. The government did not relinquish its position that the policy was addressed to “community action a general sense” and not only ACA. But the definition of community action organisations “in a general sense” was more clearly circumscribed. ACA as a specific form of community action was clearly accorded a central and privileged place in terms of its recognition as well as its financial support. The partnership framework linking organizations to specific ministries was made more supple, and left open the possibility for an organization to seek funding from a variety of government sources. Though the policy guidelines were meant to apply at the national, regional and local levels, funding frameworks would be negotiated at the centre, decided in the context of *concertation* between the single-sector federations and the relevant ministry. Mention of services and socioeconomic development was marginalized in favour of a strong discourse on citizenship, democracy, autonomy, alternatives, social transformation and so on. The final version of the policy was sufficiently anchored in the ACA discourse for it to receive support from 2/3 of the ACA delegates at a general assembly of the movement called to ratify it. This totally rewritten policy was adopted by cabinet in April 2001, exactly five years after the former Premier’s initial announcement.

Why the apparent turnaround on the part of government? Its triple strategy of non-engagement on the political level, adoption of a strictly pragmatic, coordinative discourse, and then the hasty imposition of arbitrary political authority close to the deadline, had been played badly. The RQ-ACA, in the absence of any pressure to compromise over a period of 4 years, had not only maintained but reinforced its contentious discourse as well as its legitimacy within its grassroots base. There was no need for it to relinquish its position at this point. In contrast, the government had failed to mobilise either public or institutional bias in its favour and was isolated on the issue. There had been no substantive consensus constructed even within government, as the ministries involved were made to understand that their own diverse practices could all be tolerated within the framework of this policy. The only pragmatic position to take if partnership was to be salvaged was to maintain the desired ambiguity within a small corner of the policy, while generally recognizing ACA specifically on its own terms. This final policy discourse represented a gamble that the both the government, and a majority within the ACA movement, were willing to take.

#### **Stage 4: Diffusion and legitimation<sup>8</sup>**

If the policy were to become operational, it needed to be disseminated throughout the government and community-based networks. The mandates of the SACA, the RQ-ACA and the interministerial committee were now a permanent feature of the policy and they remained conjointly responsible for its implementation. The SACA’s principal task with respect to the policy was to reframe the thinking of the

<sup>7</sup> Many of the others were linked to three hypothetical options for a very significant rethinking of the policy, which were all ultimately rejected by the RQ-ACA as well as the government.

<sup>8</sup> More detailed information on this stage of the process is available in the reports of the evaluation team, [www.evalprsac.com/Cahiers%20et%20rapports%20de%20recherche.htm](http://www.evalprsac.com/Cahiers%20et%20rapports%20de%20recherche.htm)

members of the interministerial committee<sup>9</sup> in accordance with the policy discourse and from its point of view, this meant constraining the built-in ambiguity by establishing boundaries around it. Most of the public servants who would be dealing with this policy had to be “re-educated”. Moreover, it was necessary to construct the administrative tools they would need to implement the policy and to train them in their use. This meant developing an operational frame of reference for policy implementation. This document, developed in close collaboration with the RQ-ACA, translated the ACA discourse, including concepts such as “autonomous community action” and “social transformation”, into administrative indicators. Finally, 22 different ministries gradually began to develop their own programmes for the recognition and support of community action in conformity with the policy guidelines, that is, beginning with the establishment of a governance network for their sector.

The extent to which the various ministerial programmes eventually reflected the dominant ACA discourse found in the policy was highly variable. The operational frame of reference, though written, was not adopted by the ministry in charge for another four years. It might fairly be said, then, that following the adoption of the policy, the government maintained its non-engagement strategy by refusing to take further steps that would make it operational, while off-loading implementation to the individual ministries with as little binding guidance as possible. In short, the institutional void persisted in the face of a policy discourse that, for many in government, defied operationalization within a paradigm of public administration.

But recall that the policy was not entirely path-breaking within the Québec context. Practices developed over 20 years in the health and social service field had served as a model for the policy. Moreover, almost 90% of organisations were funded by that ministry before the adoption of the policy. Now, the policy called for community organizations to be linked to the ministry whose mission was closest to theirs. Thus, one of the first operations associated with policy implementation was that “transfer” of over 700 organizations mainly from the Ministry of Health and Social Services to, for example, the Ministry of the Family and Elders and the Ministry of Immigration of Cultural Communities. The systematic exporting of community-based actors, with their ideas, practices and expectations nurtured in the health and social service field, to other government ministries, served as vector for travelling ideas. Generally, the representatives of these community groups were skilled political actors drawn from their federations, expert in interpreting the policy on their own terms. The ministerial actors, in contrast, were typically somewhat naive with respect to the policy’s implications. Old patterns and practices were challenged as bureaucratic authority was shared with legitimate, community-based interest representation. In the absence of constraints to conform to the policy, social learning took over in some sites. In others, though, the ambiguity embedded in the policy allowed path dependent adaptations that distorted the meaning of the policy ideas.

For its part, the RQ-ACA had two objectives: to keep pressure on the government to ensure that the policy would eventually be acted upon; and to mobilize the grassroots so that in their relations with their government funders, they would know and use the policy to identify their rights and support their negotiating positions. Political pressure mounted as the operational frame of reference was apparently put on the shelf and no action plan was adopted. Two years after the adoption of the policy, the RQ-ACA

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<sup>9</sup> The members of the interministerial committee had changed at this point. No longer “decision-makers” (ministers, deputy ministers or directors of policy divisions within ministries, for example) as had been the case during the policy development period, the committee was now, for purposes of policy implementation, constituted by appointed professionals within the ministries who would be dealing directly with community groups.

was publishing declarations, op ed pieces, an open letter to the minister; it had organized a demonstration in the capital; it had prepared its own draft action plan. The Parti Québec, whose policy this had been, lost power to the Liberal Party at the end of 2003, with neither an action plan nor a frame of reference in place. It seemed almost certain that political support, as weak as it had been, would now disappear, particularly with the Liberals' vow to "reengineer government" along new public management lines.

On the contrary, both the frame of reference and a 5-year action plan were unexpectedly adopted in 2004. Despite a minor shift of focus in one area, both of these reinforced the policy as it stood and gave it, as well as the SACA, new momentum. This was an important step towards institutionalization of this "out of step" policy.

### Stage 5: Institutionalization

An evaluation of the implementation of the policy for the recognition and support of community action (White et al, 2008)\*\*revealed that it was having a number of desired effects, including the spread of three-year core funding for organizations, within ministries where it had not been the norm before, and a significant and continuous drop in the prevalence of contractual relations. Even the most recalcitrant Ministry of Employment is experimenting with core funding instead of contracting and is learning to frame its discourse with respect to community organizations in ACA terms (for example, they are no longer referred to as "external resources" ). There are none the less a variety of ministries that still resist the implications of the policy for their way of working with community organisations. Some have adopted the letter, but not the spirit of the frame of reference, while others clearly reject both. The policy is not a law and cannot claim precedence over ministerial policies, if these seem to, or are claimed to contradict it. Still, certain new policies show clear signs of having taken the community action policy into good-faith consideration.

In the wake of the evaluation, a second action plan was expected to be published in March 2009. At the time of this writing (June 2009), however, the new plan has not yet appeared. Indeed, the ministry decided that instead of an action plan, there were sufficiently significant adjustments to be made to warrant a "new policy". Thus, if the diffusion of the ACA project is in progress and advancing, it still cannot be said that its institutionalization is imminent. Will a new policy from a new government undo what has been done over the last 14 years and head in a direction that the Liberal Party can call its own? The RQ-ACA has not (yet) been solicited to participate in the development of this new policy. At this time, the work remains in the hands of the SACA. This is a positive sign, seeing that these past 14 years of labour on the policy represent its entire institutional history and it has an enormous stake in its continuity. But the SACA is not the decision-making body.

Another important development to take into consideration at this stage is the adoption, in 2008, of an *Action Plan for Collective Entrepreneurship* by the Ministry of Regions and Municipalities. This was presented at the time as being "complementary to the ongoing elaboration of the new action plan for community action". It is addressed to cooperatives and non-profit organizations. This last term acknowledges the distinction that the ACA movement makes between community action groups on the one hand, and commercial non-profit organizations on the other, ranging from symphony orchestras to organizations offering domestic help or "green" services. In many cases the government itself is the principal paying client. This is the case, for example, in what is by far the biggest network of social economy organizations in the province, early childhood centres and family milieu childcare, which implement the province's \$7 /day childcare policy.

The government's action plan for collective entrepreneurship aims to help the social economy network to consolidate its regional networks, expand its partnerships, mobilize capitalization funds and so on. It was built on the foundation of a multifaceted strategic planning exercise, involving a 2006 "social economy summit" organized by the Chantier. In sharp contrast to the policy for the recognition and support of community action, this action plan is explicitly tied to a number of other government policies and programmes including the Strategy to Fight against Poverty and Exclusion, the National Rural Policy, the Employment Pact, the National Strategy for the Employment of People with Disabilities, and the Regional Development Strategy. The adoption of an action plan for collective entrepreneurship by the Liberal government at this time suggests a certain enthusiasm for the model of partnership that it represents. Is this the wave of the future then? In its rewriting of the policy for the recognition and support of community action, will the government once again attempt to superimpose this model on its relations with community action groups?

## Discussion

The questions asked at the start of this paper were : In the context of network governance, are marginal discourses destined to oblivion? Are "accommodating" discourses necessarily, or really, winners? How do we decide? The criterion chosen here is that of *effective participatory democracy*. If democracy is, in some sense, "power to the people", then, using a traditional definition of "power", we might say that participatory democracy is effective when it orients authorities' decisions and actions in a direction that they would not have otherwise taken. That is to say, simply adopting an alternative framing or naming of a programme of action is not sufficient to count as "effective". The alternative discourse must "demonstrate its transformative power" (Schmidt, 2008: 305). An example would be a policy that is implemented in ways that either bring about measurable change or "normalize" a different way of doing things. This appears to be the case in the story presented here. We might go a step further and argue that it is truly effective if it eventually becomes institutionalized as the dominant discourse and therefore, difficult to dislodge. This remains to be seen with respect to the recognition and support of autonomous community action.

Orienting authorities' decisions and actions in a context of structural opportunity, where there is either an institutional void or at the least, a context of incomplete institutionalization, meets with far less resistance than attempts to introduce path-breaking changes in a solidly institutionalized environment. The period of welfare state restructuring and the introduction of novel forms of governance present such opportunities. Network governance, an emerging feature of this process, may be established as a means to increase knowledge input to the decision-making context and reduce uncertainty. But it may also be strategically established to create uncertainty and provoke change. This paper defined network governance broadly, as the involvement of multiple actors from public, private and civil society sectors in processes of policy development and implementation. The case study presented suggests that network governance is a strategy that may be adopted by authorities, but also, by other actors who may successfully introduce themselves into the policy process. Regardless, the existence of network governance in a particular policy field is no guarantee of effective participation. There are many points on the route from "opportunity" to "institutionalization" where an alternative discourse may lose its transformative power.

The effectiveness of governance networks as channels for participatory democracy depends on both their structure and on the agency of participants. Although these are difficult to discuss separately, we will begin with agency. To address the question of which ideas "make it" and which don't, the paper

argues that we need to consider not only institutional constraints and enablers and the framing of ideas themselves but also, logics of communication and interactive processes. In other words, agency, in the form of communicative interaction, counts for as much and sometimes more than an idea's apparent compatibility with dominant or incumbent discourses to explain successful "transfer" from a marginal space to the centre. For example, it is true that the social economy discourse was far more easily integrated into the government's project from the start, thanks to its framing in terms of socioeconomic development and its reliance on *concertation* as a model of interaction. In the process, however, it was stripped of the meaning that it had for the grassroots proponents of social enterprise and their representatives. In contrast, ACA was clearly a marginal discourse. Even if it had earlier set down roots in one sector of government intervention, it ought to have been rejected as a legitimate policy discourse because all of government – including that original sector – was moving in a direction that values markets, efficiency and economic development. The RQ-ACA's contesting of taken-for-granted priorities such as "socioeconomic development" and "partnership", suggest that it was bound to be pushed back into marginality in the process of co-constructing a framework of government - civil society partnership. But the opposite occurred: ACA made its way into the heart of government policy and has begun to be disseminated throughout the public administration. Social learning may have been the key to dissemination once the policy was adopted. But to move the ideas into the policy with their meaning intact, social pressure appears to have been more effective.

Strategies of either persuasion – seeking to change another's preference – or constraint – seeking to rearrange another's perception of interests – are used by different actors at different moments in order to obtain desired changes from others (Checkel, 2001). The first rely on social learning processes, involving a coordinative logic of discursive interaction in which information, negotiation, persuasion and seduction are all mobilized towards achieving consensus, that is, a shared confidence in the value of the decision. Arguments in this context are most likely to revolve around demonstrating the unity in the diversity of the participants' positions, a key strategy of the social economy Chantier: we all want the same thing but propose alternative (or complementary) ways to achieve it. The second type of strategy depends instead on the deployment of power, or what is here called a competitive logic of discursive interaction. The aim is not consensus but the success of one project over others. It operates by the introduction of constraints or incentives that cause other actors to modify their interpretation of the situation and thus, their interests. For example, it might involve the introduction of a precipitous deadline or a new allocation of resources; or, for actors who have little control over relevant material and organizational resources, it might involve a discursive strategy that changes the relations of legitimacy, such as the release of information to the press, the winning of important allies or the mobilization of a campaign or demonstration. The competitive logic of communication emphasizes differences rather than some underlying unity of values, and is clearly the logic deployed in the principal discourse of the ACA movement. Actors competing for hegemony in a particular field will often combine both strategies. Indeed, this combination is implied by the ACA's alternative to partnership: elective and contentious collaboration. Also interesting, however, are the unexpected asymmetries that these different logics of communication introduce into the relations of network governance.

Discursive asymmetry is the best explanation for the relative success of the ACA project. It had several dimensions. First, with respect to discursive content: the ACA movement communicated a coherent and justified project for a policy of recognition and support of autonomous community action, beginning the successful bid to change the name of the SAC to the SACA in 1995. Over the next 5 years of policy development, the RQ-ACA produced at minimum four full versions of its demands for an acceptable policy – in the form of "principles", "declarations", "recommendations" – delivered to the interministerial committee or the minister in charge. These often lengthy documents remained

coherent, though increasingly detailed and well argued. Their bottom line was reiterated in face to face meetings with the minister, in letters and in briefs. In contrast, the government did not produce its first full proposal until the fall of 1999. Thus, the first face of the discursive asymmetry that characterized this governance network for its first 4 years was the presence of one well-articulated and reiterated project and the absence of any counter project. It is perhaps more common that authorities arrive at the table with a project and the partners find themselves in a situation of dependent participation, invited to deliberate an already developed discourse and unprepared to present a counter project of their own. When the civil society partners are capable of proactively presenting their own project, however, it can be the authorities that find them in a more or less dependent position as far as their own participation is concerned.

Second, with respect to discursive interaction: the government's coordinative logic of interaction provided little or no space for engagement with the RQ-ACA over basic principles and values, for example, over the *meaning* of organizational autonomy, of an organization's mission, or of "partnership", for that matter. For the RQ-ACA, on the other hand, partnership was the problem. It was contesting not just the meaning, but the value of partnership and defending instead the priority of organizations' autonomy. When this point was argued to the minister in charge in more than one face-to-face meeting, ACA delegates received assurances that autonomous community action would be protected. But here is evidence of another tension associated with discursive asymmetry : the simultaneity of two parallel logics of communication encourages ambiguity, a mainstay of coordinative discursive interaction. It was, then, an element in the government's strategy, to foster vagueness while appearing to agree to a competitive discourse. But from the RQ-ACA's perspective of a competitive mode of discourse, the government's assurances were disarming. Whether they believed the assurances or not, they were left with nothing to contest, just as in the case of the absent counter-project.

But the absence of a counter project also implies the hegemony of a dominant project, and in this case, the dominant project belonged to the ACA movement. This represents a third example of discursive asymmetry. In the context of Quebec's particular state – civil society relations, the community movement was exceptionally well organized and represented. It enjoyed a considerable degree of legitimacy within the society. Under these conditions, the government's failure to engage competitively with the RQ-ACA allowed the ACA movement to colonize the relevant political space. Refused the consensus it sought, the government developed its own policy proposal and went directly to the general population for consultation, bypassing a first round of negotiation with the RQ-ACA. But its neglect of the competitive nature of the discursive field meant that it found itself at a disadvantage. Its policy proposal found little resonance amongst the majority of the stakeholders who participated in the consultation. In contrast, the ACA discourse was by then a familiar one to this segment of the population, indeed, it was a "popular" discourse. The competitive communicative strategy of the RQ-ACA had ensured a fertile ground for the reception of its own project, while the government's remained an outlier.

A fourth and final example of discursive asymmetry is related to the definition of the situation. By confining itself to a coordinative logic of communication, the government avoided the need to undertake an astute, political assessment of its relations of autonomy and dependence with the community sector from the start – in other words, an assessment of its interests: what it had to lose. For a number of both administrative and political reasons, a government-wide policy encouraging the expansion of community-based service provision by non-public sector organizations and rationalizing relations with these groups had not lost, but rather had gained importance since 1995. Moreover, the community milieu constituted a significant political base for this government. The failure to adopt a policy after 5 years of well-publicized (by the RQ-ACA) negotiations, or the imposition of an unpopular

policy that would perturb rather than smooth relations between them, were not attractive options for the government. However, the possibility and therefore the consequences of failure, or perhaps even the definition of failure, were not part of the government's early concerns with respect to this policy. Thus, despite its positional power, the government was in a more dependent position than it had perhaps considered throughout much of the process. Only the last-minute imposition of a series of principles suggests a serious diagnosis. Under these conditions, the skilful deployment of discursive strategies by the ACA movement in favour of its own project throughout the policy development period was sufficient to counter the material, organizational and symbolic resources of the government.

Agency alone is not responsible for the outcome of the case presented here. Indeed, the outcome is largely attributable to the structure of the governance network in question and to questions of metagovernance. These in turn are partially determined by the specific institutional context, outlined in the second section of this paper: the fact that a relevant self-organized network already existed and did not have to be called into existence by authorities; the fact that this civil society network was composed of a web of interlocking sub-networks bridging both scales of action and sectors of community action; the fact that the governance network for the development and implementation of this policy was not a path-breaking phenomenon, but that some experience had already been accumulated by many of the participants, prior knowledge had been developed with respect to what works, and what doesn't, and the desired model was already in effect in one sector, from which it could ideally be disseminated. These may well be exceptional conditions. The point is, however, that this dense structuring of civil society in Quebec can be accounted for in large part by similar stories of transformative and reflexive agency as those recounted in the paper. There are clearly conditions that would pose insurmountable constraints to the emergence or effectiveness of such strategies: for example, a civil society already structured through competitive contracting along more individualist lines, and oriented more towards organizational development than collective action as a means to improve their position in relation to government. None the less, the Quebec story suggests that, under conditions of nascent self-organization of civil society, agency needs to be considered as powerful as positional dominance. The case study further suggests that, for weaker actors, both their legitimacy and their capacity to act depend upon a strategic understanding and deployment of the relations of scale and intersectoral relations, both to bolster its collective identity and to render the dissemination of its project more effective.

It would be a mistake, however, to exaggerate the success of the underdog in network governance, even in the favourable conditions of Quebec society. The final policy for the recognition and support of community action did not have sufficient "teeth" to constrain various ministries to conform. This was function of its status (e.g. not a law, and under the auspices of one ministry that had no authority over others) as well as the peculiar character of its discourse (for many, outside the realm of known public administrative discourse). Moreover, we saw that once it was adopted, the government had accomplished its minimum objective and abandoned the policy in the hands of the SACA, a lowly secretariat faced with the challenging mandate to ensure its propagation throughout all the ministries and agencies of the state. Finally, the evaluation of the policy was used as an opportunity for the government to attempt to regain a certain control over the partnership discourse. Whether it succeeds remains to be seen.

## Conclusion

This paper was concerned with the potential of network governance to ease the transfer of ideas, relatively intact, from the grassroots into governing institutions, a test of effective participatory

democracy. In contrast to a number of studies of the relation between governance networks and democracy, it did not assume that formal representative democracy the only standard to be protected. Rather, it starts from the premise that formal representative democracy atrophies without effective participatory democracy to ensure that ideas of social justice make it onto the political agenda and into policy. Particularly in the absence of a social democratic party within the formal political field, the vote is often insufficient to foster social justice. Traditional channels of participation such as consultations and other exercises orchestrated by authorities do not provide the same opportunity that network governance does for collective civil society actors, with organized interests, to participate consistently and over a long enough term to effectively influence policy orientation. Under the conditions of the new politics of the welfare state, the prevalence, but especially the contingencies of network governance may have a significant impact on welfare state restructuring.

The case study presented here explored the structural conditions and discursive strategies that might effectively promote participatory democracy in the context of network governance. Throughout Europe (Lewis, 2005; Bode, 2006) and North America (Kramer, 1994; Richmond and Shields, 2004) a locally governed “contract culture” has become the normative model framing state-civil society relations, constructing an equivalence between state, market and community for welfare service delivery. Québec has so far resisted the incursion of this model, and there is little indication that this would be the case were it not for the opportunities provided for the community movement to participate in network governance as a legitimate partner, as well as the strategic agency of that movement. With discourse as its only means of influence, it deployed not only contentious ideas but also, a particular logic of communicative interaction – contentious collaboration – to achieve hegemony within the governance network. But its relative success was also depended upon the creation and maintenance of discursive asymmetries. Authorities countering with a similarly competitive logic of discourse may have had little difficulty in implanting their own partnership project, and may yet succeed. But their strategy of disengagement and reliance on a purely coordinative logic over four years of competitive identity policy and project definition placed them in an unexpectedly weak position when the moment for compromise was upon them.

What has this case revealed about the relation between network governance and democracy? Klijn and Skelcher (2007) have identified four “conjectures” regarding the relation between governance networks and democracy and they can serve here to help summarize some of the conclusions. The first conjecture is that they governance networks and democracy may be incompatible when democratic institutions fail to maintain a grip on “metagovernance”, or the rules and mandates that steer governance networks. However, the case presented here suggests that if elected officials maintain a firm grip on metagovernance, then transformative agency will undoubtedly be blocked, and governance networks will be reduced to path-dependent coordinative exercises.

A second conjecture presented by Klijn and Skelcher proposes that governance networks can be complementary to formal representative democracy, where they contribute to the input legitimacy of elected governments and lead to social learning. However, where governance networks are sites of contentious collaboration, civil society input may *delegitimize* elected authorities’ projects. Moreover, the opportunity to mobilize, organize and represent challenging interests and ideas may further politicise participant groups in civil society. Thus, in the wake of the “walk-out” scenario at Quebec’s socioeconomic summit of 1996, community actors in coalition with others inaugurated Québec’s first social democratic party, Québec Solidaire (Dufour, 2009)

But Klijn and Skelcher's third conjecture holds that governance networks can also have an instrumental relation to democracy, when representative leaders are solely concerned with using governance networks to increase efficiency in the accomplishment of their own goals. This is one of the possibilities that the ACA movement was most intent on preventing in its relation with the Quebec government; it is one of the main principles on which it distinguished itself from the social economy network, which framed its own objectives in terms of the government's. But the case examined in this paper suggests that it is also possible for civil society groups to instrumentalise governance networks. The policy for the recognition and support of community action was originally a community-based demand, transformed into a government promise but ultimately designed, in most of its essential aspects, to meet the community movement's objectives. Instrumentalization is in fact a form of transformative agency, where either authorities or challengers – depending in large part upon the discursive asymmetries and relations between them – colonize others' projects for their own ends.

Finally, Klijn and Skelcher's last conjecture says that the relation between network governance and democracy may be a "transitional" one: a phasing out of formal representative democracy in face of its growing deficiencies and the emergence of new forms of democracy, principally deliberative democracy. This case study suggests that governance networks may be less "transitional" spaces than spaces of tension, where the contradictions of democratic governance typical of state-civil society relations – that is, the engagement of bottom-up and top-down authority – are played out. Principal actors have the possibility of putting those contradictions in the foreground and intervening directly to either reinforce or shift the balance of power (Gough, 2004; Ghose, 2007). While this may represent the ideal-typical dynamic of network governance, the norm rather tends towards dependent participation, where a single, dominant project is either supported or, at best, resisted.

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