



# Network Legitimacy and Accountability in a Developmental Perspective

A Case Study

RICHARD K. GHERE

---

## Abstract

Public networks typically function beyond the lines of the hierarchical authorities that hold bureaucracies accountable, as is shown here in the case of a business-dominant network that exhibited ethically questionable behaviors at the expense of its community credibility. Public networks can build external legitimacy by engaging in critical organization learning processes, much the way some nongovernmental organizations respond to a diversity of stakeholders.

---

**Keywords:** accountability, economic development, legitimacy, public network.

Public networks have emerged as interorganizational and multisector institutions that offer collaboration and specialization in coping with complex programmatic missions. These interdependent entities typically function beyond the lines of authority that hold traditional bureaucracies accountable to elected policymakers and other community stakeholders. Thus, questions arise as to whether and under what circumstances nonhierarchical collaboration in networks circumvents democratic processes (see, e.g., de Bruijn and Ringeling 1997, 152–165; Herrantz 2007, 1–31; O’Toole and Meier 2004, 681–693). The case study here depicts such a network—the Dayton Development Coalition (DDC)—that influences public appropriations for economic development in a twelve-county urbanized region in the Midwest.

This inquiry probes the problematic relationship between legitimacy and accountability in a weak-government network wherein private sector managerial norms

prevail. It begins by examining the relationship between legitimacy and accountability from a capacity-building perspective that outlines how weak-government collaboratives can be more responsive to citizens' expectations. Next it summarizes a case study of a weak-government public network, the Dayton Development Coalition (DDC), that shapes economic development in an urbanized region. The conclusion analyzes the specifics of the DDC case in reference to a research agenda on public networks.

### **Legitimacy and Accountability in Public Networks**

Taken separately, the terms "legitimacy" and "accountability" can be understood as two distinct (but desirable) qualities of an organization that may be related in some sense. For example, legitimacy could be minimally defined as "credibility" (Human and Provan 2000, 128), and accountability as "willingness to give accounts," such as reports, explanations, justifications, or even excuses (Scott and Lyman 1968, 46–47). These two concepts are closely related in a capacity-building context. From this perspective, it could be inferred that "claims to legitimacy" are essentially appeals for recognition of an organizational identity and role, and that a willingness to "account" spurs on that recognition from those outside the organization as well as those within (see Edwards and Hulme 2002, 198).

In proposing an agenda for researching public networks, Beverly Cigler (2001) raises topics for inquiry that presume a close relationship between legitimacy and accountability. Four of these topics (p. 77) poignantly <pointedly?> address the specifics of the Dayton Development Coalition case:

What is the basis of legitimacy for organizations that do not possess the traditional reins of government authority?

When government is the "weak sector" within a collaboration, what are the effects on accountability traditionally defined as linkages and responsiveness to citizens?

If new emergent organizations are examples of the building of social capital, how representative are they of the entire community, and how responsive are they to the community?

What changes occur in the culture and operations of the existing organizations as they gain experience with collaborative partnerships?

Taken together, these questions probe accountability issues over an extended time, beginning with the fundamental question of legitimacy, weighing the possibility of creating social capital, and then anticipating subsequent adaptations in network culture and operations that could emerge.

Correspondingly, this article approaches issues of network credibility and responsiveness by drawing upon discussions of capacity building through organization learning, a predominant theme found in research on nongovernmental organizations. Conceivably, leaders of weak-government networks could utilize organization learning as a strategy to change the collaborative culture to reflect a stronger commitment to external accountability and community responsiveness. The balance of the discussion in this section probes legitimacy along with alternative account-

ability responses that could be directed toward the expectations placed upon public networks such as the DDC.

### *Logics of Legitimacy*

If legitimacy depends on recognition of identity and role, then organizations need to cope with the variations in stakeholder perceptions of how the network functions. Extending this interpretation of legitimacy to issues of effectiveness, it can be reasoned that organizations (whether NGOs, networks, or bureaucracies) must amass sufficient “capacity” to strategically negotiate the legitimacy logic(s) that affirm their identities. Alan Fowler draws upon his field experience in NGOs to characterize what is meant by “capacity”:

. . . current uses of the term imply that capacity can be understood as a number of core abilities, together with the means and relationships through which to express them. Analysis of the NGO sector indicates that to be effective, three principal areas of ability are required. These are:

An ability *to be*: that is, to maintain its specific identity, values, and mission;

An ability *to do*: that is, to achieve stakeholder satisfaction; and

An ability *to relate*: that is, to manage external interactions while retaining autonomy. (2002, 301–302)

Juxtaposing contexts, it is instructive to compare Fowler’s characterization of NGO core abilities with Provan and Milward’s (2001) strategy of probing network effectiveness at the three levels of organization/participant, the network itself, and the community, as presented in their article on evaluating public network effectiveness (414–423). There appear to be congruencies between the ability—

- to be and a network’s relevance to organization/participants (i.e., Is the network’s existence worth organizational/participants’ efforts to participate?);
- to do and a network’s administrative organization to perform at a cost reasonable for participants; and
- to relate and a network’s engagement of stakeholders at the community level.

Human and Provan (2000) break down network legitimacy into three dimensions: network as form (again, related to the ability *to be*), network as entity (ability *to do*), and network as interaction (ability *to relate*). They differentiate two legitimacy-building strategies—“outside-in” (start by focusing on interaction with community stakeholders) and “inside-out” (start by attending to internal network participants and then ultimately tending to the external community). In that the two case networks in their study adopted these alternative strategies, Human and Provan’s analysis provides considerable insight into the relationships among network life-cycle stage, capacity, and legitimacy-building. As shown below, network leaders can facilitate