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## **Preface**

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**Biographical notes:** Tobias Gössling received his PhD in Political Sciences from Witten/Herdecke University, Germany. He works as an Assistant Professor in Organisation Studies and as a Research Faculty in Tilburg Sustainability Center, both Tilburg University. His main research focus is on the consequences of institutions, particularly in relation with collaboration and responsibility issues. He has published widely in these areas. He is a board member of the European Business Ethics Network.

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## **1 Introduction**

Multi-organisation, Partnerships, Alliances and Networks (MOPAN) is a loose network of researchers from across a disparate range of fields and disciplines seeking to make sense of the new sets of relationships that are emerging between the sovereign state (embodied in governments and state bodies at various scales), the market (private enterprise and trading firms) and civil society (broadly defined as ‘the public’ or some

collective variant of consumers or citizens). Traditionally, such research was of interest mainly to business and political analysts, who tended to examine the role of

- a firms and organisational arrangements in explaining the operation and success of markets
- b the state or in the regulation of the market and civil society.

More recently a wider concern has emerged which focuses on the way that public and business or state interests are involved in multiple forms of alliances and other collaborative arrangements for maintaining social order.

In part, the MOPAN interest in this changing relational landscape has resulted from contemporary awareness that politics and markets are themselves undergoing something of a transformation. In this sense, the concept of governance, which features prominently in this issue, directs attention to the proliferation and fragmentation of arrangements and relationships that have come to the fore in contemporary political, economic and civil life. Central here is the growing acceptance that sovereign states or individual business firms are no longer the exclusive anchors of political regulation and market activity. Instead, the boundaries between the three spheres of the state, the market and civil society, so clearly distinguishable and demarcated in early analyses, have become more permeable or dissolved and been replaced by more complex relationships. Increasingly, governance involves a shift from centralised bureaucratic and hierarchical forms of interaction and decision-making to a plurality of coexisting networks and partnerships that interact as overlapping webs of relationships and influences at diverse spatial scales, from the neighbourhood to the globe.

MOPAN researchers have been interested in exploring all aspects of these changing relationships and circumstances including those which have entailed a move away from traditional analyses of government regulation and market hierarchies and their control of society and markets to a conceptualisation of governance based on flexible and facilitative forms of collaboration between government representatives, businesses and other non-government agents. Here, traditional governmental and market structures, institutions and practices are components of a broader notion of governance that embraces a wide range of institutions and actors working together on a formal and informal basis.

Collaboration between multiple parties is a governance mechanism, a possibility to organise a coordination challenge in order to provide goods or services (Jones et al., 1997; Williamson, 1975; Powell, 1990). In many cases, collaboration is a more efficient form of coordination than market coordination or coordination within hierarchies. As opposed to markets, the interaction between actors is not completely anonymous and the type and quality of relationship between the parties is not irrelevant. On the other hand, the relationship between actors is not necessarily characterised by power, hierarchies, dependence and employment – in contrast to the case for relationships within firms. This is one explanation why collaboration as organisational form exists and persists.

In addition to this, empirical evidence supports this reason for the persistence and relevance of collaboration, as it becomes a more and more dominant and prevalent organisational phenomenon (Oerlemans et al., 2007). However, not all forms of collaboration are alike; collaboration between multiple parties can take a great multitude of different forms, which poses many questions about collaboration, good governance mechanisms for collaborations, challenges for managers and partners with regard to

behaviour and communication, and the conditions under which partners collaborate well or not.

## **2 Social science approaches in collaboration research**

In recent years, there has been a whole wealth of research on the phenomenon of inter-organisational and multi-party collaboration (IOC). The theory of the firm perspective on collaborations has contributed to understanding why inter-organisational collaboration exists at all and why, and for which purposes, they are more efficient than markets or hierarchies. In addition to this, research has indicated that other reasons for partnering exist than efficiency arguments. Another stream of literature has focused on structural characteristics of collaborations in order to understand the effects of structural differences for the partners of an organisational network or the network as a whole (Borgatti and Foster, 2003). Research in this tradition has highlighted the meaning of network density and actor centrality, which have become important variables for understanding networks and inter-organisational relations (IORs). Furthermore, there is a tradition of post-structuralist, interactionist research (c.f. Borgatti and Foster, 2003; Oerlemans et al., 2007) that aims at understanding processes of collaboration, communication and any other sort of interaction that takes place between the partners in collaboration. Contributions in this tradition help us to understand the variability of practice and outcomes; for example, different actors in similar structural conditions show different kinds of behaviour and differ in collaborative success.

Most of the scholars who take part in MOPAN's research on multi-organisational partnerships, alliances and networks take an interactionist perspective on collaboration in order to contribute to the understanding about what IOCs are and how they function. As such, the papers in this special issue contribute to this project of understanding collaboration. This special issue presents a selection of papers that were presented on the 16th MOPAN conference in Maynooth, Ireland, 17–20 June 2009. Thus, the papers in this issue contribute to understanding collaboration as a form of interaction between actors. Even though they are different in kind, they focus on actors and their actions with respect to collaborative efforts and help us understand the conditions of collaboration as well as consequences of actors' behaviour with regard to outcomes of collaboration. This collection mirrors the multi-disciplinary approaches as well as the multitude of questions explored by the members of the MOPAN research community.

## **3 Structure of this volume**

The first article, 'Packing more punch? Developing the field of inter-organisational relations', by Steve Cropper, Mark Ebers, Chris Huxham and Peter Smith Ring, provides an overview of the debate about IOCs in the last 50 years. From this starting point, the authors develop an agenda for the field of IOC research for the future in order to establish a 'science of IOR' (IORs). Their analysis shows that the different approaches within IOR research are relatively independent of each other and that, consequently, the field of research is thus highly fragmented and disjointed. With a view to integrating contemporary theoretical and empirical knowledge, they propose three steps, first, juxtaposition, second, assemblage and comparison, and third, assimilation and

integration. They suggest that juxtaposition should help researchers to understand the context and span of the field of research on IOR as well as their own contribution to this research. Juxtaposition is a task for editors and all those who organise academic debate about IORs. Assemblage and comparison, on the other hand, is a task for scholars who do research about IORs and who are requested to start looking out for other researchers who could possibly contribute to research projects by providing different insights and inputs for the respective project. Finally, assimilation and integration of knowledge is a possibility and a challenge for individual researchers to expand their own research beyond their conventional field of knowledge or the approaches that they usually work with. These three steps are central to the vademecum for IOR research proposed by Cropper and Huxham et al.

In the second article, 'An examination of a reciprocal relationship between network governance and network structure', Carsten Bergenholtz and René Chester Goduscheit focus on innovation networks and analyse structural and non-structural aspects of these networks, namely the network structure, on the one hand, and the governance dimension, on the other. By so doing, the authors contribute to the idea of assemblage and comparison. The central question of the article is about the nature of the relationship between network governance and network structure. The authors analyse a case wherein both changes in structure and governance could be observed and analysed for the purpose of identifying mutually constitutive aspects of the relationship. As argued by the authors, throughout the literature we find the overall assumption that the choice of network governance depends on the structure of the respective network. However, in their case, the authors find support for the assumption that the relationship between structure and governance can be reciprocal, and conclude that the way a network is governed also influences the network structure. This is, amongst other reasons, due to the fact that the manner in which a network is governed can attract or repel actors.

The third article, 'Mechanisms of private meta-governance: an analysis of global private governance for sustainable development', by Pieter Glasbergen, is also about governance. However, it is not about network governance in the sense of network management but rather in the sense of a framework of valid rules. This article focuses on the characteristics of global governance for sustainable development. Glasbergen focuses on the following problem: In sustainable development, many different actors are active. Especially given the cross-national nature of many development issues, institutional aspects become complicated. Many national and international regulations are valid, but there is also something like an institutional vacuum, coordination problems that ask for regulation and a lack of appropriate regulation, or, in Glasbergen's words, an 'orchestration deficit'. In the conceptualisation of global governance, Glasbergen argues that global governance as meta-governance could be undertaken by private actors rather than by the state or governments. Aside from arguments of effectiveness, Glasbergen assumes an important political dimension in this kind of governance, namely the possibility to bring democratic elements into this field of governance.

The fourth article, 'Proximity and duration in temporary organisations', by Tobias Gössling and Joris Knobens, deals with another important assumption in IOC research. Very often, IOCs are regarded as one specific governance form. However, the authors argue that this assumption may be over-simplifying IOCs as empirical phenomena, given the great diversity of IOCs. A central feature of IOCs is time and

temporality – a characteristic that can be used fruitfully to distinguish between IOCs. Temporary organisations are specific IOCs that are established for certain purposes and have a limited duration or definite time-horizon. Furthermore, the authors argue that physical proximity between actors matters for their ability to collaborate and eventually for the outcome of an IOC. This research is based upon a dataset about temporary organisations in the Netherlands. It shows that organisations with high levels of organisational or geographical proximity collaborate better with each other and show higher levels of goal achievement. Furthermore, face-to-face-interaction between members of organisations is more important for the quality of interaction between collaboration partners than mere local distance.

The final article, 'Utilising a national protocol for collaboration on environmental problems in Ireland: the Silvermines case', by Carrie Garavan and Barbara Gray, presents a case-study of a multi-party collaboration in Ireland. The Silvermine case is a collaborative effort initiated by The National Protocol for the Investigative Approach to Serious Animal/Human Health Issues in Ireland. A former silver mine caused health problems to humans and animals and, in order to solve these problems, multiple agencies had to collaborate. Apparently, there was uncertainty about the initial goal of the collaboration. Therefore, an important 'emergent' result of collaborating involved arriving at an understanding of the purpose of, and defining a goal for, collaborating. The paper shows the importance of problem identification and clear communication, as well as effective leadership, for goal achievement through collaboration.

In this issue, we have presented five articles that reflect some of the growing concern of MOPAN researchers with changing conditions of governance and experiences of collaboration amongst various parties in the context of these changes. Foremost among these changes has been a transformation from centralised, bureaucratised and market anchored arrangements to a plurality of self-organising, co-existing networks and partnerships that interact at diverse spatial scales. To explain these emerging developments, researchers have drawn on ideas derived from political sciences, sociology and economics, invoking research frameworks deriving from diverse theoretical traditions. As we have indicated, the theoretical roots of thinking about governance and collaboration are extremely varied and it is, therefore, not surprising that the articles here, like the general literature on the subject, is also extremely eclectic. However, interaction theory is increasingly being deployed to make sense of the roles and interactions of collaborators in a changing context and that trend is reflected in the articles presented here. Altogether, these papers contribute to a better understanding of collaboration. Even though structural aspects of collaboration are important, structure alone is not sufficient to understand the processes and outcomes of collaboration. Governance matters as well as communication. And not all forms of collaborations are alike, because partners in collaborations vary in many ways but also because the purposes and the conditions for collaboration are different.

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