**Metagoverning Collaborative Networks:**

**Advancing a Cumulative Power Perspective**

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The following is an excerpt of a full article, which omits the analysis. For full version, please contact either [alq@ruc.dk](mailto:alq@ruc.dk) or [ohustad@ruc.dk](mailto:ohustad@ruc.dk).

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Abstract

Collaborative networks are gaining momentum in research and practice as a tool to solve complex problems and create public value. While being characterized as self-regulating and relatively autonomous, it is recognized collaborative networks have been widely recognized to need metagovernance to drive their collaborative process forward. However, limited attention has been paid to how metagovernors succeed in exercising power without undermining the capacity of collaborative networks to solve collective problems. To contribute to this knowledge gap, we develop a framework based on a cumulative power perspective in the context of the metagovernance of collaborative networks. We outline three modalities of metagovernance (output, input, and process) through which metagovernors can exercise power by structurally privileging either their own interests or those on whose behalf they metagovern. We apply the theoretical framework to an illustrative Danish case study of collaborative networks in sustainable housing, drawing on in-depth interviews, documents, and observations. Through our case study, we showcase the repressive and constructive features of power in the metagovernance of collaborative networks. A key lesson is that metagovernors can gain a better awareness of how to balance the fine line between constructively and repressively exercising and distributing power in collaborative networks by understanding the power dynamics entangled in the different modalities of metagovernance.

**Keywords:** metagovernance; collaborative networks; constructive and repressive power; cumulative power perspective

# 1. Introduction

Collaboration in networks and partnerships is gaining increasing influence in both public management practice and scholarship under the cognate concepts of network governance, collaborative governance, and co-creation (Emerson et al., 2012; Provan & Kenis, 2008; Torfing et al., 2021). Collaborative networks can be used as an umbrella concept encompassing all forms of collaborative arrangements, referring to when public, private, and civil society actors, especially local citizens, come together to jointly define common problems and develop innovative solutions that create public value (Crosby et al., 2017; Gestel & Grotenbreg, 2021). Collaborative networks have thus been advanced as an innovative tool to mobilize citizens and marginalized actors in the production of public value (Mendez et al., 2022; von Heimburg et al., 2023), particularly at the level of local government. They are ostensibly “based on horizontal partnership relations” (Sørensen & Torfing, 2018, p. 411) where all participants are involved “on equal footing” (Ansell & Torfing, 2021a, p. 216), and thereby eschew traditional forms of hierarchical governance.

Although collaborative networks are conceptually framed as relatively autonomous and self-regulating networks, an emergent stream of research insists that some kind of governance is necessary for facilitating and steering collaborative processes (Ayres, 2019; Hofstad et al., 2021, 2022). Without governance, collaborative networks may fail to progress toward their collective goals (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009), which can result in the collaborative destruction of public value (Engen et al., 2021). Therefore, scholars have argued that *metagovernance* is a suitable way of governing collaborative networks. Metagovernance avoids undermining the autonomy of collaborative networks by resorting to a toolbox of subtle governance tools which individually involve limited exercise of power, but which in combination can be an effective method to steer collaborative networks toward their objectives (Connell et al., 2019; Sørensen & Torfing, 2006).

However, a dilemma emerges at the intersection between the metagovernance and collaborative networks literature (Jessop, 2020; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). On the one hand, the collaborative networks literature maintains that power imbalances are one of the most significant reasons for the failure of collaborative networks, as they erode organizational trust, stifle creativity and innovation, and undermine accountability (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). On the other hand, the metagovernance literature shows that metagovernance unavoidably involves the exercise of power ’in the shadow of hierarchy’ (Bell & Park, 2006; Scharpf, 1994) when steering collaborative networks toward specific objectives (Torfing, 2016). Consequently, the interface between these two premises suggests that the metagovernance of collaborative networks is unlikely to succeed, despite evidence of the growing prevalence and success of collaborative networks around the world (Ansell & Torfing, 2021b). Departing from the conflicting premises of this dilemma, the research question of this article is: *how do metagovernors succeed in exercising power without undermining the capacity of collaborative networks to solve collective problems?*

To reconcile these conflicting assumptions on power and equality, we argue that metagovernors can successfully steer collaborative networks and be perceived as legitimate if the power is exercised constructively by structurally aligning different collaborative junctions, that is, moments of collaborating interactivity within the collaborative network. To this end, we develop a theoretical framework that outlines three modalities of metagovernance which illustrate both the constructive and repressive use of power. First, metagoverning outputs refers to steering collaborative networks predefined objectives that are structurally privileged by metagovernors. Second, metagoverning inputs and interests involves managing tensions between opposing forces by aligning their interests with the predefined objectives. Third, metagoverning processes describes how metagovernors steer collaborative processes towards the structurally privileged project objectives.

We describe our framework as a cumulative power perspective, because the individual effects of metagoverning outputs, inputs, and processes might seem negligible in isolation, but their aggregate effects are significant in terms of the power exercised. We showcase the utility of our theoretical framework by applying it to a case study situated in Roskilde, Denmark, which illustrates how the use of metagovernance and its accompanying relations power exercise involves funneling the self-serving interests of metagovernors through the cumulative effects of metagoverning outputs, inputs, and processes. The strategic function of metagovernance, then, is to cloak and legitimize the self-serving use of power by structurally (re)aligning the interests of collaborative network participants and shaping the collaborative inputs and processes in accordance with the project objectives put forward by metagovernors.

This article continues as follows. In the next section, we review the extant assumptions about the relationship between power, metagovernance and collaborative networks. We subsequently introduce our theoretical framework of cumulative power exercise through metagovernance in the third section. In the fourth section, we present our case and methods, followed by the case analysis in the fifth section. Finally, we summarize our analysis in the sixth section by discussing our framework and providing some avenues for future research.

# 2. Collaborative networks, metagovernance, and power

A burgeoning literature exists on network-based, collaborative modes of governance, such as network governance (Provan & Kenis, 2008), collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008), and co-creation (Ansell & Torfing, 2021a). These cognate concepts have their distinct properties in terms of who initiates and leads the collaborative process, the degree of involvement of different stakeholders, and the situations in which collaboration takes place. However, they all have in common that they encompass the collaborative efforts of stakeholders from different sectors, including public agencies, private companies, NGOs, research institutions, foundations, citizens and/or other stakeholders that come together to deliberatively address common goals and create public value (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Provan & Kenis, 2008; Sørensen et al., 2021). We shall refer to these collaborative entities under the umbrella term of *collaborative* *networks* (Gestel & Grotenbreg, 2021).

A key question for research on collaborative networks is how to govern them without undermining their capacity to solve problems and create value. Collaborative networks are complex entities because they customarily involve participation by different stakeholders with different levels of power and resources, and because they ideally should be able to work relatively autonomously without being subordinated to strict hierarchical governance. Different strains of research on collaborative networks have unanimously argued that a form of facilitative leadership is ideal to govern collaborative networks. Consequently, *metagovernance* has been widely argued to be the best way to govern collaborative networks (Ayres, 2019; Crosby et al., 2017; Ongaro et al., 2021). Broadly speaking, metagovernance should be understood as “the governance of governance” (Kooiman, 2003) as the key to its success is in utilizing a complementary mix of governance tools based the subtle and indirect use of power, commonly relying on social coordination and interactive decision-making to govern self-regulating collaborative processes without undermining their autonomy (Whitehead, 2003).

The term *metagovernor* is here used to refer to the actor(s) and/or organization(s) conducting the metagovernance. The power enjoyed by metagovernors emanates from their role within collaborative networks as facilitative leaders (Magee & Frasier, 2014), making them recognized by project participants as legitimate authorities to steer collaborative networks. As Granovetter (2017) explains, central actors are powerful not only because they possess resources, but also because of their role in brokering the transfer and channeling of resources between actors, which confers them the capacity to exercise power over collaborative processes. Metagovernors need to be relatively resourceful actors, and the extant literature assumes that public agencies often take on this role due to their formal authority and democratic legitimacy (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). However, metagovernors can also be other types of actors, such as resourceful network administrative organizations (Saz-Carranza et al., 2016) and citizens (Fisker et al., 2022). According to Sørensen and Torfing (2009), metagovernors can utilize four types of metagovernance tools to steer collaborative networks, which are can either be deployed indirectly at a distance or directlyin close interaction between the metagovernors and collaborative networks (see Appendix 1).

From a processual perspective, metagovernance tools can be deployed at different junctions of the collaborative process where metagovernors discreetly can exercise power. This includes (a) the initiation and convening of collaborating actors to manage *collaborative inputs*, (b) the steering of *collaborative processes* in relation to conflict management and collective decision-making, and (c) the management of *collaborative outputs* in terms of decision-making and implementation. The exercise of power in these different junctions might seem negligible in isolation, but when deployed in coordination, it can be a powerful tool to privilege certain interests and outcomes over others.

Insofar as the metagovernance literature is concerned with power, it has largely focused on how metagovernance can be used to promote mutual gains in collaborative networks. On the one hand, the extant literature argues that metagovernance can be constructively utilized to ‘even the playing field’ by mitigating unequal power resources between actors through active interventions in the collaborative arena, so that marginalized actors and communities are empowered through inclusive participation (Bryson et al., 2002). The crux of the argument is that metagovernance can achieve the benefits of facilitative leadership while avoiding the overt exercise of power by powerful and resourceful actors to impose their will on decision-making processes (Torfing & Triantafillou, 2011).

On the other hand, while it has been generally recognized that collaborative networks are conceptualized as self-organizing networks, they are in practice always occurring “in the shadow of hierarchy” (Scharpf, 1994). A key concern for metagovernance, then, is that power imbalances might jeopardize the success of collaborative networks by undermining network participants’ trust in each other, which is a crucial component of successful collaboration (Ansell & Torfing, 2021b; Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Purdy, 2012; Røiseland, 2022). The metagovernance literature recognizes that metagovernors have the discretion to regulate the autonomy of collaborative networks in response to risks of governance failure by facilitating and coordinating collaborative networks (Fox et al., 2022). Metagovernance is thus an inherently political process permeated by relations of asymmetrical power and authority (Bell & Park, 2006).

These conflicting theoretical propositions can be reconciled by consulting the distinction between power *over*,referring to the exercise of power for own gains, power *to*, referring to the exercise of power for the mutual gain of the collaborative process, and power *for*,referringto the exercise of power for the altruistic benefit of other actors in collaborative networks(Huxham & Vangen, 2005; see also Torfing et al., 2012). We argue that instead of occupying passive, administrative roles that necessarily preserve the formal equality between actors, metagovernors assume proactive leadership positions that involve the exercise of power *over* participants in collaborative networks for their own gains (Hofstad et al., 2021; Torfing & Ansell, 2017). However, the power exercise of metagovernors extend beyond their own gains, as the exercise of power *over* needs to be reconciled with the power *for* participants, which is the key to answering our research question of *how metagovernors succeed in exercising power* *without undermining the capacity of collaborative networks to solve collective problems*. To explore the link between how metagovernors exercise power to advance their own gains side-by-side with the gains of collaborative networks, we propose a theoretical framework for analyzing power exercise in metagovernance, namely the cumulative power perspective.

# 3. Introducing the cumulative power perspective

While previous research has examined broadly how power is exerted in the contexts of collaborative governance (Purdy, 2012) network governance (Maron & Benish, 2022; Saz-Carranza et al., 2016), and cross-sector collaboration (Huxham & Vangen, 2005), limited attention has been paid to how power is *concretely* exercised through the metagovernance of collaborative networks. In dialogue with the extant literature on collaborative networks, we build an analytical framework for analyzing the metagovernance of collaborative networks categorized into three modalities: (a) outputs, (b) inputs (and interests), and (c) processes (Table 1).

*Table 1. An overview of the three modalities of metagovernance*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Modalities of metagovernance** | **The constructive use of power** | **The repressive use of power** | **Metagovernance tools** |
| Output | Pre-defining the overarching project goal such that collaborative processes are purposive and defined by criteria of success | Steering the targeted outputs of the collaborative network by anchoring project goals aligned with the interest of the metagovernor(s) in the project design | Managing collaborative outputs in the form of goals or objectives through network framing by:   * Formal requirements (legal, financial, administrative) * Informal norms and expectations based on a particular goal |
| Input (interests) | Identifying and selecting relevant and affected participants that are aligned with the designated project goals | Filtering the potential range of inputs and interests entering or circulating the collaborative network | Managing the range, scope, and configuration of collaborative inputs through the control of network participants by:   * Selectively enlisting and excluding actors * Normative (re)framing of the values, interests, and identities of participating stakeholders |
| Process | Steering the collaborative network towards its collective goals | Managing the collaborative networks to shape the range of interests that can be effectively articulated | Steering the collaborative processes through network design and management towards specific agendas and goals by:   * Steering the ideational content through the mediation of conflictual issue areas, interests, or objectives * The control of access to material resources (knowledge, time, administrative, political, cultural) |

Our framework is premised on a cumulative and processual perspective of power, emphasizing that power can be exercised at various strategic junctions of the collaborative process that can change due to the influence of metagovernance. It analytically prioritizes how metagovernors systematically use metagovernance tools to ‘funnel’ their own interests through the metagovernance of outputs, inputs and interests, and processes (see Figure 1). We contend that asymmetrical power relations should not be evaluated based on discrete instances of power (Purdy, 2012), each of which might seem negligible in isolation, but rather on their aggregative influence in structurally privileging outcomes that benefit specific interests. The framework furthermore inverts the traditional analytical sequence of inputs-processes-outputs, which is premised on the assumption that collaborative networks are organized around open-ended processes. Contrary to this linear notion that inputs logically precede processes, which in turn generate outputs, we argue that outputs in collaborative networks are broadly pre-determined and thereby set the trajectory for subsequent inputs and processes. Inputs and processes are thereby how metagovernors ensure that their chosen outputs are realized in collaborative networks.

*Figure 1: A processual and cumulative perspective on metagovernance*

Et billede, der indeholder skærmbillede, cirkel, tekst, design

Automatisk genereret beskrivelse

Our theoretical model builds upon a further distinction between the constructive and repressive use of power. We define power as the capacity of an actor to influence the behavior of others by structurally privileging (or biasing) their interests or desired outcomes (Almond & Verba, 1965; Jessop, 2016). This definition avoids a strictly behavioral and binary view of power (Dahl, 1961; Weber, 1978), which emphasizes that power exercise yields winners and losers through control mechanisms that go against the will of some actors and, in turn, yield potential resistance. A behavioral lens foregrounds direct and overt uses of power but overlooks the cooperative forms of power that characterizes metagovernance. Consequently, we do not only see power as involving the use of repressive force, whereby some interests are privileged while others are marginalized. It also involves governance techniques and practices that involve “constituting governing agents, identities, interests, and strategies” (Jessop, 2020, p. 55) so that those subjected to the use of power internalize the interests of those in power. Power can be constructive despite privileging the interests of metagovernors because collaborating actors often have underdetermined beliefs, values, and preferences related to the overarching objectives of the collaborative network. The constructive use of power thus entails supporting collaborating actors to shape their underdetermined beliefs (power for) and, in this process, structurally align their interests with those metagovernor￼[[1]](#footnote-1)￼. In conclusion, the exercise of power does not presuppose that A makes B do something that B would otherwise not do, as B might not have had a firmly established belief or preference in the first place[[2]](#footnote-2).

## 3.1 Metagoverning outputs

During the initiation of collaborative networks, participants are not agnostic about network objectives. Outputs are rarely, if ever, completely open-ended in the sense that problem formulations and solutions emerge out of free deliberation. Instead, participants in collaborative networks usually have preconceived interests and desired outcomes in the form of an overarching, predefined agenda, based on which participants are invited to contribute with inputs due to their expertise or insights (Craig & Mayo, 1995). Metagovernors can structurally privilege their interests in collaborative networks through network framing (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009), whereby they mandate specific objectives as a criterion (formal or informal) for the collaborative process (Mariani et al., 2022; Saz-Carranza et al., 2016). There is a general assumption in the literature that collaborative processes should be open-ended when it comes to outputs (Sørensen et al., 2021). In practice, however, collaborative processes will likely become inefficient and disoriented in the absence of a directional focus (Maron & Benish, 2022). The constructive purpose of power exercised through metagoverning outputs, then, is to promote a logic of goal-attainment through establishing a relationship between a collectivity and a collective goal (Parsons, 1963).

Metagoverning outputs are realized by formally or informally enshrining objectives, goals, norms, or expectations in collaborative networks. Issuing formal requirements customarily involves a direct imposition of a formal agenda (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009) in terms of output requirements. In contrast, the imposition of informal requirements is enforced through a set of normative requirements about the broader purpose of collaborative networks, to which the participants tacitly are committed through their participation. When imposing formal and informal requirements, metagovernors are faced with a dilemma. They can exercise power prior to involving other actors in the process by predefining network objectives, thereby limiting the maneuvering space for project participants to the scope of fulfilling these criteria (Arnstein, 2019). However, if the output goals are too narrowly defined, it will limit the innovative potential of collaborative networks, as stakeholders might feel straitjacketed. Thus, the metagovernance of outputs must be formulated as objectives that can be lived up to in multiple ways, thereby maintaining a level of latitude in the range of acceptable actions. Nonetheless, the objectives should be specific enough for metagovernors to be able to assess and steer collaborative networks towards fulfilling them.

## 3.2 Metagoverning inputs and interests

Metagovernance can be utilized to steer the potential range of inputs and interests that enter the collaborative network (Dunsire, 1990; Fung, 2006). In practice, metagovernors can select network participants by imposing formal or informal inclusion criteria (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009), structurally privileging the access for some stakeholder groups, while minimizing efforts to include others. Stakeholders can also be filtered informally by imposing participation demands that cannot be met by all actors, for instance by scheduling network meetings at times and places that are difficult to access for some actor groups (Purdy, 2012). Consequently, metagovernors can secure “a wider unstable equilibrium of compromise” (Jessop, 2020, p. 59) by balancing the interests at play in collaborative networks (Bell & Park, 2006). The constructive purpose of metagoverning inputs and, consequently, interests is to enlist participants whose motivations and competencies can be seen “as vehicles of the exercise of power” (Torfing, 2016, p. 529) for realizing the overall objectives of collaborative networks. The chief challenge in metagoverning inputs is to secure “a stable exchange of resources in the face of conflicts between relatively self-interested actors” (Torfing, 2016, p. 528). Metagovernors must ensure that actors are only enlisted if they qualify as ‘affected’ and ‘relevant’, defined as actors who either possess skills and resources relevant to the problems that collaborative networks seek to address (relevant), or are affected by the solutions that are developed (affected) (Ansell, Torfing and Sørensen, 2022). This classification is inevitably based on arbitrary boundary conditions (administrative unit, geographical scope, required competences, etc.), and metagovernors can therefore exercise power by determining who qualifies as relevant and affected actors in collaborative networks.

Metagoverning inputs also involves manipulating social norms within collaborative networks to instill a group identity, which streamlines the interests of network participants with the objectives of the collaborative network (see Goffman, 1959; Wenger, 2000). The success of collaborative networks depends on a capacity to collective action, which must be anchored in a shared engagement among participants towards a common objective (Emerson et al., 2012). First, this involves anchoring the logic of distributed leadership, which gives the participants a sense of empowerment and, consequently, a capacity to collective action (Kark et al., 2003; Torfing et al., 2019). Second, an important step is to confer legitimacy upon selected interests, while concurrently “reducing or even eschewing the representation of [others]” (Bell & Park, 2006, p. 72). This can be achieved by disseminating norms and rituals about consensus-building to enforce social pressures, convincing actors to accept compromises even if it is against their interests (Emerson et al., 2012; Rossner & Meher, 2014). The metagovernance of interests thereby functions as a social sanitizing mechanism that prohibits certain opinions from being communicated, either by excluding them subtly from collaborative inputs or by reconstituting their beliefs and values[[3]](#footnote-3).

## 3.3 Metagoverning processes

Metagovernance serves a wide-reaching function in steering collaborative *processes,* referring to the processes involved in identifying the solution(s) to the project objectives that have been established through the metagovernance of outputs. To this end, metagovernors must act as facilitative leaders (Ayres, 2019; Hofstad et al., 2021). The constructive purpose of metagoverning processes, then, is to ensure a structural alignment between collaborative processes and the broader objectives advanced through the metagovernance of outputs in order to avoid collaborative deadlocks. Most significantly, metagoverning collaborative processes occur through the mobilization of bias (Almond & Verba, 1965; Bachrach & Baratz, 1962) and the exercise of ideological power (Lukes, 1974) through process design. To this end, rules, norms, and routines are engineered to service a particular agenda (Bell & Park, 2006; Sørensen & Torfing, 2009) that structurally privileges some interests and outcomes over others. In practice, this implies constraining specific collaborative interactions and deliberative choices, thus maintaining a latitude of options that does not foreclose influence but nonetheless limits the possibility to shirking from the predefined output goals.

A key tool in metagoverning processes involves network management (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009), which involves controlling the access to relevant resources necessary for joint decision-making (Emerson et al., 2012). Following Purdy (2012), resources can both be defined as material (financial, administrative, technological, people) and ideational (knowledge, expertise, and time). For instance, metagovernors can selectively limit the scope of information accessible to network participants, which hinders participants from making fully informed decisions. They can also control temporal resources by respectively maximizing or minimizing time slots where network participants can voice their objections or support for specific collaborative outputs. Withholding administrative support or financial resources can also conveniently limit the handling of requests that are perceived as problematic to project objectives.

# 4. Case and methods

To illustrate the utility of our cumulative power perspective, we apply it to a Danish case study (henceforth GREENBUILD) situated in the municipality of Roskilde. Denmark is a particularly relevant context for investigating the role of power in metagovernance of collaborative networks, as the use of such networks is a widely disseminated practice in Danish local governments (Hofstad et al., 2022). GREENBUILD was initiated and primarily funded by a private foundation, the BRF Foundation, with the aim of designing and developing a new dormitory for craftsman students in the Musicon area in Roskilde. The BRF Foundation hired the social architect firm Hele Landet – consisting of four process consultants acting as project facilitators *qua* metagovernors – to drive the project forward. The project was initiated in close collaboration with Roskilde municipality, who granted planning permission for the dormitory based on a set of basic requirements for local construction projects.

GREENBUILD involved three metagovernors that fall into two types of metagovernor roles: hands-on and hands-off (Sørensen & Torfing, 2009). On the one hand, the BRF Foundation and Roskilde municipality predominantly used “hands-off” tools by issuing specific requirements for the project at a distance but did not participate actively in the collaborative process of developing the dormitory design. On the other hand, the four process consultants from Hele Landet assumed a visible role with “hands-on” tools throughout the collaborative process, as they had the formal responsibility for driving the dormitory design process forward. The metagovernors in GREENBUILD engaged two categories of project participants in the collaborative network: the craftsman students from the local vocational school (Roskilde Tekniske Skole)[[4]](#footnote-4), who would provide their inputs as representatives of the target group for the future dormitory, and three teams of architects, developers, and artists, who would offer a range of design ideas that they would test on the craftsman students.

The collaborative process consisted of three weekend-long design prototyping workshops that took place in the remains of an old industrial hall in Musicon and involved Hele Landet, craftsman students and the architectural teams. During the workshops, design ideas were explored through the use of different materials and tools that enabled participants to visualize and develop prototypes for possible designs for the dormitory, including separate or common kitchens, small or big workshop rooms, and so on. Next, the craftsman students would develop proposed design solutions in collaboration with three participating architects and artists. In engaging with these visualizations and prototypes, the craftsman students would provide inputs to Hele Landet and the architectural teams on their preferences for the future dormitory. Finally, the three architectural teams would subsequently enter the architectural competition of the GREENBUILD project after the workshops, where one of them ultimately would win the contract for designing and constructing the final dormitory (see Figure 2 for a timeline over the collaborative process).

*Figure 2. Timeline of the collaborative process in GREENBUILD.*

Et billede, der indeholder tekst, software, Multimediesoftware, Computerikon

Automatisk genereret beskrivelse

For the case study, we collected relevant documents, observations of project workshops and interviews with involved actors. In selecting the interviewees, we focused on contacting a diverse range of actors involved in the project, including the metagovernors and project participants of GREENBUILD. We conducted two rounds of interviews, following an abductive strategy that conceptually anchored all the interviews and data analysis based on our framework (Fletcher, 2017). The first round of interviews targeted project owners and funders, who were identified as potential metagovernors to map out the modes of metagovernance potentially exercised in the project from the perspective of our analytical framework. The second round of interviews targeted project participants subjected to these modalities of metagovernance, where we asked about their experiences of the use of metagovernance in GREENBUILD and their experiences of the accompanying power asymmetries. The chief purpose of the second round of interviews was to understand whether the project participants recognized the constructive purpose of power exercise or found it repressive. In total, 15 interviews were conducted between December 2022 and October 2023, ranging in length from 45 to 90 min (see Table 2 for an overview of the interviews). In addition to the interviews, we conducted observations of two half-day workshops facilitated by Hele Landet, which involved craftsman students, architects, and artists, as well as relevant documents about the GREENBUILD project. Each author coded and analyzed the data individually according to the three categories of our theoretical framework, and the coding was subsequently discussed in plenum between the authors to refine both the coding and the framework. In the following analysis, we illustrate the utility of our analytical framework with evidence from the GREENBUILD case.

*Table 2. Overview of interviewees and their role in GREENBUILD.*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Interviewee role** | **Organization(s)/actor group(s)** | **Number of interviews** |
| Metagovernors (bureaucratic actors, foundation manager) | The BRF Foundation and Roskilde municipality | 4 |
| Project facilitators | Hele Landet | 3 |
| Project participants (primary active) | Craftsman students | 4 |
| Project participants (secondary active) | Architects, developers, and artists | 3 |
| Affected actors | Local citizens and business owners | 1 |

# 6. Conclusion

Collaborative networks are theoretically framed as formally equal collaborative arrangements, although they seldom remain free of hierarchical power relations in practice. To shed light on this ambivalence, we have proposed a framework that showcases how the exercise of power through the metagovernance of collaborative is subtle and often imperceptible. The theoretical framework outlines three modalities of metagovernance through which power can be exercised in metagoverning collaborative networks. First, metagoverning outputs involves steering actors towards predefined collaborative network goals. Second, metagoverning inputs and interests refers to how metagovernors selectively include certain actors in collaborative processes, and frame which interests are legitimate in those processes. Finally, metagoverning processes describes how metagovernors narrow down the range of possible solutions during collaborative processes, and how they steer collaborative processes toward predefined output goals.

While metagovernance can contribute to making collaborative networks efficient, it can also compromise their nonhierarchical and open-ended character, a feature for which collaborative networks are often hailed in the literature (Bentzen et al., 2020; Sørensen et al., 2021). Whereas the extant literature assumes that metagovernors can minimize their use of power and, therefore, avoid interfering with the self-regulating capacity of collaborative networks, we problematize the assumption that the excessive use of power *per se* is a problem. Instead, with our cumulative power perspective, we argue that power in metagovernance is often quite noticeable when evaluating its aggregative influence. From this follows that power can be reconciled with collaborative networks, although only when the use of repressive and constructive power is structurally aligned. Insofar as collaborative networks can never be power-free, the chief purpose of our cumulative power perspective is to map the use of power strategies deployed through metagovernance to understand how they are leveraged towards potentially constructive and repressive ends.

Our study yields the noticeable conclusion that power asymmetries encapsulated in the metagovernance of collaborative networks are likely to be normatively licensed by participants if they recognize a structured alignment between the metagovernance of outputs, inputs, and processes. In other words, the (il)legitimate use of power cannot be evaluated based on the isolated analysis of discrete instances of power, but rather the constructive alignment and cumulative effects of different modalities of metagovernance deployed at various collaborative junctions. Metagovernors can, therefore, successfully structurally privilege their interests without major resistance only if they establish a feedback loop between the metagovernance of outputs, inputs, and processes. In our case study, this feedback loop is showcased by how the metagovernance of (a) outputs (by predefining and narrowing the project objectives) and (b) inputs and interests (through selectively enlisting network participants and building a collective identity within the project) created a supportive environment for the exercise of power during the (c) metagovernance of processes (by steering and controlling the ideational and material content of the collaborative process).

Our case study also calls for a further problematization of the subtle exercise of power through metagovernance, as the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent conflicts and disagreements from arising in the first place (Lukes, 1974). Proponents of collaborative networks have touted them as new organizational forms that can potentially reimagine participative forms of democracy by facilitating dialogue, thereby ensuring that public policies are responsive towards the needs and preferences of affected stakeholders (Sørensen & Torfing, 2005). However, these claims rely on the assumptions that metagoverning collaborative processes are normatively licensed by the principles of discursive rationality and consent-based decision-making, in which all stakeholders are expected to participate on equal footing (Fung et al., 2003; Habermas, 1991). In contrast, our case study reveals that the legitimacy of collaborative networks depends on whether network participants, first, accept the outputs that have been structurally privileged by the metagovernors and, second, whether they recognize that the metagovernance of collaborative inputs and processes align with collaborative outputs.

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. However, B might have reached another conclusion had A not attempted to influence them. Thus, when collaborative networks are organized around issue areas where each stakeholder has clearly defined interests, the efficacy of metagovernance will be reduced. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. These social dynamics of power can also be viewed from a Parsonian perspective, where power involves the capacity of metagovernors to secure the performance of the collaborative participants by issuing social obligations towards collective goals (see Parsons, 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While these students would not be able to live in the final dormitory, they provided representative insights into the needs of craftsman students for the design of the dormitory. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)