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NETWORK MANAGEMENT IN PUBLIC POLICY IMPLEMENTATION: CONCEPTUAL REFLECTIONS AND PRACTICAL INSIGHTS

Ilham
Doctoral Program in Public Administration, Faculty of Social and Political Science, Hasanuddin University, Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km.10, Tamalanrea, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia Corresponding author: ilhamjuli641@gmail.com

Muhammad Yunus
Faculty of Social and Political Science, Department of Public Administration, Hasanuddin University, Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km.10, Tamalanrea, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, myunus59@yahoo.com

Gita Susanti
Faculty of Social and Political Science, Department of Public Administration, Hasanuddin University, Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km.10, Tamalanrea, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia, gitasusanti65@gmail.com

Yosephina Ohoiwutun
Master of Public Administration Study Program, Cenderawasih University, Jl. Raya Abepura–Sentani, Jayapura City, Papua, Indonesia
yossi_ohoiwutun@yahoo.com

Ibrahim Kristofol Kendi
Doctoral Program in Public Administration, Faculty of Social and Political Science, Hasanuddin University, Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km.10, Tamalanrea, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia
kendikristofol@gmail.com

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Abstract. *This article explores the role of network management in enhancing the effectiveness of public policy implementation in multi-actor and complex project contexts. Using a theoretical-conceptual approach and secondary literature, the study synthesizes institutional, relational, and meta-governance perspectives, illustrated with empirical evidence from tobacco*

prevention policy in Switzerland. The findings indicate that active network management—through facilitation, mediation, and consensus building—strengthens implementation performance, particularly in conflict-prone policy environments. Contextual factors, including institutional status, network integration, managerial workload, and a policy design phase, as well as temporal dimensions, such as long-term engagement and adaptive learning, influence the success of these strategies. Practically, the article emphasizes strengthening managerial capacities, inter-actor coordination, and continuous evaluation to improve the effectiveness of public policy implementation.

Keywords: *network management, governance, collaborative, public policy.*

Raktažodžiai: *tinklų valdymas, vadyba, bendradarbiavimas, viešoji politika.*

1. Introduction

The dynamics of modern governance have reshaped the formulation and implementation of public policy, as the complexity of contemporary issues can no longer be addressed solely through bureaucratic mechanisms. Over the past two decades, public administration has undergone a transformation alongside an increasingly multisectoral society, in which political and administrative authority has become fragmented, and both governmental and non-governmental actors are no longer able to resolve complex social problems independently. The rigidity and centralization of hierarchical models have been increasingly questioned, prompting a shift toward more adaptive and inclusive network-based collaborative governance (Wang and Ran 2023; Hadorn 2022).

The network approach emphasizes the involvement of diverse stakeholders in the formulation and decision-making processes of public policy. Addressing complex problems requires multi-actor participation, making this approach particularly relevant as a social structure composed of actors interconnected through information exchange, resource distribution, legal relationships, and various forms of interaction (Craps and Brugnach 2015; Carlsson and Sandström 2008). Sørensen and Torfing (2005) assert that the network approach emerged as a response to the limitations of traditional government models that were overly state-oriented. In many developing country contexts, government dominance in the policy process has been shown to limit cross-actor collaboration. Similarly, Torfing (2005) argues that traditional and overly state-centric models of governance tend to limit interaction and collaboration between actors in policy networks. Thus, governance is no longer solely a matter for the government but rather the result of interaction between various actors in policy networks.

In contemporary public administration studies, the network approach has undergone significant development (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000). Awareness of the limitations of conventional top-down models in policy implementation has prompted scholars to develop

alternative frameworks capable of capturing the complexity of implementation processes more comprehensively (Sabatier 2008). The network approach is viewed as an adaptive response to increasingly complex and fragmented policy environments (Agranoff and McGuire 2001), with its processes continuously evolving in line with changing environmental conditions and the dynamics of the actors involved (Ulibarri et al. 2020). This theoretical perspective is further supported by empirical evidence; comprehensive studies indicate that network governance has become an essential form of multi-organizational coordination in the provision of public services (Provan and Kenis 2008). Although collaborative approaches are not new to public administration, their intensity and scope have increased dramatically in recent decades, demanding the collective attention of both scholars and practitioners (Kapucu and Hu 2020). Moreover, the global trend toward collaborative governance reinforces the relevance of the network approach in contemporary public policy research and practice (Ansell and Torfing 2021).

Previous studies have focused on network structures or macro-level governance, while the influence of managerial mechanisms and operational contexts on policy implementation performance has rarely been discussed. Previous literature has also often overlooked the role of managerial strategies in network outcomes (Ysa et al. 2014). In this regard, Klijn et al. (2010) assert that without active network management, governance structures alone are insufficient to guarantee the achievement of expected results.

For example, Provan and Kenis (2008) focus on the form and coordination of networks, while Agranoff and McGuire (2001) emphasize adaptation to complexity; both pay less attention to the interaction of contextual factors and managerial activities at the specific implementation level. Therefore, there is a need to integrate perspectives that previous studies tend to separate, namely institutional, relational, and meta-governance approaches, into a comprehensive analytical framework to explain network effectiveness. This opens up space for research that highlights how managerial activities, interaction dynamics, and contextual factors influence implementation outcomes. Thus, this paper links context, network management, and implementation performance at the micro or project level, where Hadorn's (2022) contribution becomes relevant. Concrete case studies, such as policy implementation in developing countries or the Swiss case analyzed by Hadorn (2022), demonstrate varying degrees of network management effectiveness and emphasize the importance of analysis that links theory with actual practice.

Based on these theoretical and empirical advances, this article seeks to deepen the understanding of the network approach by highlighting the analytical dimensions of network management in the policy implementation process. Rather than viewing governance networks solely as structures, this study emphasizes the managerial and contextual mechanisms that enable networks to function effectively and generate policy outcomes. By synthesizing institutional, relational, and meta-governance perspectives, the discussion aims to explain how managerial activities, contextual factors, and interaction dynamics collectively shape implementation performance. This conceptual orientation forms the foundation for the subsequent analytical framework, which integrates theoretical arguments with

empirical illustrations to explore the relationship between network management, context, and policy effectiveness.

2. Method

This study adopts a theoretical-conceptual approach to examine and synthesize scholarly perspectives on network management in public policy implementation. This approach is employed to deepen conceptual understanding of governance dynamics characterized by multi-actor involvement and complex contextual conditions (Jaakkola 2020). The data are drawn from secondary scholarly literature, including reputable international journal articles, foundational academic books, and prior empirical studies relevant to network governance and network management. The literature was selected purposively based on its relevance and theoretical contribution. Empirical studies, such as Hadorn's (2022), are used as analytical illustrations rather than as primary empirical evidence. The analysis is conducted through conceptual analysis and theoretical synthesis, integrating institutional, relational, and meta-governance perspectives to explain the relationships between contextual conditions, managerial mechanisms, and policy implementation performance (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Agranoff 2007; Torfing et al. 2012). This study strengthens the theoretical foundation of network management research and provides an analytical framework for future empirical inquiry (Bacharach 1989).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Rethinking Network Management: Institutional, Relational, and Meta-Governance Perspectives

If we trace the meaning of network management individually, in the context of policy studies, the word "management" is more interpreted as activity management (Klijn 1996). Meanwhile, "network" is interpreted as interaction or collaboration between actors in a policy. So, "network management" can be construed as an activity that manages interactions between actors in a policy.

Theoretically, network management can be viewed from complementary institutional and relational perspectives. The institutional perspective (Powell and DiMaggio 1991) emphasizes the role of formal structures and rules in shaping actor interactions, while the relational perspective (Agranoff 2007; Mandell 2001) highlights interpersonal relationships, social dynamics, as well as trust-building, conflict mediation, and facilitation of communication among stakeholders. The third perspective (Torfing et al. 2012) combines institutional and relational elements within a meta-governance framework, viewing network management as a strategic intervention that shapes actor interactions without reducing

their autonomy and flexibility. This approach emphasizes complexity, uncertainty, and the importance of adaptability and learning in network governance.

Contemporary theoretical perspectives on network management increasingly recognize the importance of context in shaping network dynamics. Bryson et al. (2015) emphasize that the effectiveness of network management strategies is highly dependent on contextual factors, including the characteristics of the problem at hand, the institutional landscape, and political conditions. In parallel, Emerson et al. (2012) developed a collaborative governance framework that places network management in broader socio-ecological systems, recognizing that network dynamics are shaped by and contribute to the wider policy ecosystem.

The empirical investigation conducted by Hadorn (2022) contributes to this theoretical discourse by identifying two fundamental questions in the study of network management: first, how different constellations of contextual factors influence the level of network management activity (active versus non-active), and second, how network-level characteristics, including network management, interact with project-level characteristics to influence implementation performance.

3.2 Understanding the Context of Active Network Management

As Hadorn (2022) observes, the dynamics of network management are not uniform but highly dependent on context. Four key conditions—institutional status, network integration, managerial workload, and a policy design phase—collectively shape how active or passive network management emerges in practice. The legal status of the management institution is a significant determinant of the autonomy and legitimacy of network managers. Research by Bressers and O'Toole (2005) shows that organizations with stronger legal status tend to have greater access to resources and institutional legitimacy, facilitating the implementation of more proactive network management strategies.

The level of integration in a network represents the structural position of the network manager and his or her access to the flow of information and resources in the network. Burt (2004) developed the concept of "structural holes," which explains how actors who connect previously unconnected groups have strategic advantages regarding information access and control. An empirical study by Berardo and Scholz (2010) shows that network managers with a high degree of centrality, as measured by the number and quality of their connections with other network actors, tend to be more effective in coordinating network activities and mediating inter-organizational conflicts.

The caseload that network managers handle influences their time allocation and attention to network management functions. These findings are consistent with research conducted by Milward and Provan (2003), which shows that an imbalance between managerial responsibilities and available administrative resources often hampers the effectiveness of network management. The policy design phase represents the temporal context of policy implementation and influences the scope of discretion available to network managers. In

parallel, a study by Howlett et al. (2009) shows that different phases in the policy cycle, from formulation to evaluation, require different management approaches, with significant implications for network management strategies.

Hadorn's (2022) analysis expands our understanding of the interactions between these contextual factors. The study identifies how specific constellations of legal status, integration, caseload, and policy design phases interact through configurational comparative analysis to produce active or non-active network management patterns. These findings are consistent with the "equifinality" approach advocated by Ragin (2008), which suggests that the same outcome (in this case, active network management) can be produced through different combinations of causal factors.

3.3 Rethinking the Link Between Network Management and Implementation Performance

The link between network management and policy implementation performance deserves renewed attention, particularly in light of recent empirical findings such as those presented by Hadorn (2022). Rather than treating this relationship as linear, it is more accurate to view it as dynamic and multi-level. Network management operates simultaneously at the system and project levels, where managerial actions, contextual conditions, and interaction patterns collectively shape implementation outcomes. This perspective resonates with the analytical framework developed by Provan and Milward (1995), which conceptualizes network effectiveness across multiple layers, from individual organizational performance to broader network-level outcomes.

At the network level, Hadorn (2022) identifies network management as a significant determinant of collective problem-solving capacity. These findings align with previous research by Klijn et al. (2010), which shows that proactive network management strategies contribute positively to the quality of the collaborative decision-making process and the suitability of the resulting solutions. More specifically, the study demonstrated that network managers who actively employ facilitation, mediation, and brokerage strategies tend to facilitate higher levels of collaboration and coordination among network actors.

At the project level, Hadorn (2022) identified several factors that influence implementation performance, including task complexity, resource availability, and level of political support. These findings are consistent with the implementation analysis framework developed by Matland (1995), which proposes that the interaction between the level of policy ambiguity and the intensity of political conflict influences implementation dynamics. Projects with low ambiguity and strong political support tend to show more linear and predictable implementation patterns, while projects with high ambiguity and intense conflict require a more adaptive and learning-based implementation approach.

Hadorn's (2022) Bayesian analysis revealed complex interactions between network-level and project-level characteristics in shaping implementation outcomes. Specifically, the study shows that active network management has a more substantial positive effect on

project performance in complex tasks and contentious policy environments. These findings are in line with the contingency perspective proposed by Turrini et al. (2010), which suggests that the effectiveness of a particular network management strategy depends on the contextual and substantive characteristics of policy implementation.

Hadorn's study also identified the moderating effect of network structural characteristics on the relationship between network management and implementation performance. Specifically, active network management shows more substantial positive effects in networks with lower levels of structural integration, indicating a compensatory role of network management in less optimal structural contexts. These findings reinforce the perspective that Herranz (2008) proposed, which suggests that different management strategies may be required for networks with different structural characteristics.

The temporal dimension has also proven to be important in policy implementation. The relationship between network management and implementation performance evolves over time, with the positive effects of active network management becoming more evident in mature implementation phases. These findings align with Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) on the importance of continuity and learning, as well as Majone and Wildavsky's (1978) concept of "implementation as evolution," which views implementation as a dynamic process that develops through interaction with the policy environment.

3.4 Illustrative Insights from the Swiss Smoking Prevention Policy

The case of tobacco prevention policy in Switzerland provides an illustrative example of how contextual factors and managerial mechanisms interact within governance networks, influencing implementation performance. This section draws on Hadorn's (2022) study as an analytical reference to demonstrate how active network management can enhance coordination, stakeholder engagement, and implementation effectiveness in complex policy environments. Switzerland offers a particularly informative context due to its federal structure, where cantons possess significant autonomy in implementing health policies. At the cantonal level, tobacco prevention programs are carried out through networks involving both governmental and non-governmental actors, creating a valuable "policy laboratory" to observe how institutional status, network integration, and managerial workload shape network management practices.

In his comparative analysis, Hadorn (2022) examined 13 cantonal implementation networks involving both structural and behavioral interventions. The findings revealed considerable variation in network management approaches across cantons. Some networks exhibited active management—characterized by intensive coordination, facilitation, and consensus building—while others followed more passive or non-active patterns, with limited managerial intervention. These variations were associated with differences in the institutional authority of managing organizations (governmental versus non-governmental), the level of integration within the tobacco policy network, the volume of cases handled, and the maturity of the prevention program.

Hadorn's configurational analysis identified several pathways leading to active network management. A combination of strong institutional status (typically governmental organizations), high levels of network integration, moderate caseloads, and mature implementation phases tended to result in more proactive management strategies. Conversely, in cases where institutional authority was weaker, strong integration and adaptive managerial engagement could compensate for structural limitations—a finding consistent with Ragin's (2008) principle of *equifinality*, whereby similar outcomes can emerge from different combinations of causal factors.

In terms of implementation performance, networks exhibiting active management generally achieved higher levels of success in meeting smoking prevention objectives. This effect was especially evident in complex interventions, such as enforcing smoke-free regulations in public spaces or restricting tobacco marketing. In these settings, coordination, mediation, and consensus building played a crucial role in overcoming resistance and mobilizing support from diverse stakeholders.

A growing body of research supports this insight. Network management has been shown to be closely linked to the outcomes of governance networks, with active strategies—such as connecting actors and facilitating collaboration—enhancing mutual trust and performance (Klijn et al. 2010). Similarly, Andrews and Beynon (2017) found that "technical networking" or intensive interaction among partners correlates with higher stakeholder support, while Edlmann and Grobbelaar (2021) emphasize that facilitation and coordination foster open communication, conflict management, and alignment of stakeholder expectations. The involvement and creativity of multiple actors is therefore not merely a procedural formality, but a defining feature of contemporary governance.

Hadorn's (2022) analysis also underscores the interaction between network management and project characteristics. Active network management was found to have a stronger positive impact in complex projects with higher potential for conflict. These findings align with Klijn et al. (2010), who demonstrated that the number and quality of management strategies implemented significantly influence network outcomes, and with Ysa et al. (2014), who showed that trust building and facilitative strategies enhance managerial influence on network dynamics. Finally, the Swiss case highlights the temporal dimension of policy implementation. Long-term prevention programs tended to exhibit greater effectiveness, reflecting the importance of sustained engagement, learning, and adaptation over time. This observation resonates with the evolutionary view of policy implementation, which emphasizes incremental adjustment through trial and error and institutional learning (Bullock et al. 2021).

4. Conclusion

This study emphasizes that network management is not merely a structural or procedural function but a dynamic and strategic activity embedded in multi-actor governance

contexts. The discussion shows that active network management—through strategies such as actor linkage, facilitation, mediation, and consensus building—plays a crucial role in enhancing collaborative performance, particularly in complex and conflict-prone policy environments. Contextual conditions, including institutional status, network integration, managerial workload, and the stage of policy design, determine the extent to which these strategies can be effectively applied.

Furthermore, the temporal dimension emphasizes that long-term engagement, adaptive learning, and sustained coordination are crucial for achieving meaningful policy outcomes, with implementation evolving through iterative cycles of experimentation and institutional learning, underscoring the adaptive nature of governance.

From a practical perspective, these reflections reaffirm the strategic importance of network management in mobilizing stakeholder commitment, coordinating collective action, and fostering collaborative problem-solving. Strengthening managerial capacities—both individually, through professional development, and institutionally, through supportive governance frameworks—is essential for improving implementation effectiveness in complex network settings. Although this article does not present new empirical findings, its conceptual synthesis provides a robust analytical foundation for further inquiry. Future research could extend this framework across diverse policy domains, institutional arrangements, and temporal scales, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how networks of actors can be effectively governed to address contemporary public challenges.

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Data Availability Statement

The data used to support the findings of this research are available from the corresponding authors upon request.

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Ilham, Muhammad Yunus, Gita Susanti, Yosephina Ohoiwutun, Ibrahim Kristofol Kendi

TINKLŲ VALDYMAS ĮGVENDINANT VIEŠĄJĄ POLITIKĄ: KONCEPCINĖS REFLEKSIJOS IR PRAKTINĖS ĮŽVALGOS

Santrauka. *Čia nagrinėjamas tinklo valdymo vaidmuo didinant viešosios politikos įgyvendinimo efektyvumą daugiašaliuose ir sudėtinguose projektuose. Remiantis teoriniu-konceptualiu požiūriu ir antrine literatūra, tyrime susintetinamos institucinės, santykinės ir metavaldymo perspektyvos, iliustruojamos empiriniais įrodymais iš tabako prevencijos politikos Šveicarijoje. Išvados rodo, kad aktyvus tinklo valdymas – pasitelkiant moderavimą, tarpininkavimą ir sutarimo kūrimą – stiprina įgyvendinimo rezultatus, ypač konfliktams linkusioje politikos aplinkoje. Kontekstiniai veiksniai, įskaitant institucinį statusą, tinklo integraciją, vadovų darbo krūvį ir politikos kūrimo etapą, taip pat laiko aspektai, tokie kaip ilgalaikis įsitraukimas ir adaptyvus mokymasis, turi įtakos šių strategijų sėkmei. Straipsnyje pabrėžiamas vadovų gebėjimų stiprinimas, veikėjų tarpusavio koordinavimas ir nuolatinis vertinimas, siekiant pagerinti viešosios politikos įgyvendinimo efektyvumą.*

Ilham, Doctoral Student, Public Administration Program, Hasanuddin University, Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km.10, Tamalanrea, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia.
E-mail: ilhamjuli641@gmail.com

Muhammad Yunus, Dr. (PhD). Professor of Public Management, Hasanuddin University, Department of Public Administration, Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km. 10, Tamalanrea, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia.
E-mail: myunus59@yahoo.com

Gita Susanti, Dr. (PhD). Professor of Public Organization, Hasanuddin University, Department of Public Administration, Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km. 10, Tamalanrea, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia.
E-mail: gitasusanti65@gmail.com

Yosephina Ohoiwutun, Dr. (PhD). Professor of Public Administration, Cenderawasih University, Master of Public Administration Study Program, Jl. Raya Abepura–Sentani, Abepura, Jayapura City, Papua, Indonesia.
E-mail: yossi_ohoiwutun@yahoo.com

Ibrahim Kristofol Kendi, Doctoral Student, Public Administration Program, Hasanuddin University, Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km.10, Tamalanrea, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia.
E-mail: kendikristofol@gmail.com

Ilham, Hasanuddin universiteto Viešojo administravimo programos doktorantas, Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km.10, Tamalanrea, Makasar, Pietų Sulavesis, Indonezija.
El. paštas: ilhamjuli641@gmail.com

Muhammad Yunus, Dr.(PhD). Hasanuddin universiteto Viešojo administravimo katedros viešojo valdymo profesorius Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km. 10, Tamalanrea, Makasar, Pietų Sulavesis, Indonezija.
El. paštas: myunus59@yahoo.com

Gita Susanti, Dr. (PhD). Hasanuddin universiteto Viešojo administravimo katedros visuomenės organizavimo profesorė Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km. 10, Tamalanrea, Makasar, Pietų Sulavesis, Indonezija.
El. paštas: gitasusanti65@gmail.com

Yosephina Ohoiwutun, Dr. (PhD). Cenderawasih universiteto viešojo administravimo profesorė, viešojo administravimo studijų programos magistrė, Jl. Raya Abepura–Sentani, Abepura, Džajapuros miestas, Papua, Indonezija.
El. paštas: yossi_ohoiwutun@yahoo.com

Ibrahim Kristofol Kendi, Hasanuddin universiteto Viešojo administravimo programos doktorantas, Jl. Perintis Kemerdekaan Km.10, Tamalanrea, Makasar, Pietų Sulavesis, Indonezija.
El. paštas: kendikristofol@gmail.com

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