DEFINING AND MEASURING THE LEGITIMACY OF COLLABORATIONS

To address complex social problems, public authorities in many countries are developing “holistic” or “integrated” services, where multiple actors and professions collaborate with a view to better meet the needs of the individual citizen. These collaborations often break significantly with existing practices and regulations and need to be legitimized to be accepted - not only in the eyes of the public and politicians, but also to caseworkers and the citizens targeted by the services.

Legitimacy is here understood broadly as the acceptance of a policy design or public service granted by one or more groups of people. Legitimacy is thus a subjective concept depending on the point of view of the group(s) assessing the moral value of the policy. It should be stressed that a group’s ascription of legitimacy to a policy does not necessarily mean that they support it, but that they at least accept it because it was decided and implemented in an acceptable manner.

Our research in the EU Horizon 2020 funded project Transforming into Open, Innovative and Collaborative Governments (TROPICO, Work Package 8) included a literature review mapping the academic debate on the legitimacy challenges emanating from collaborative governance. We also conducted comparative case studies of long-term unemployment services in five European countries. While the main focus of the case studies was on the accountability of collaboration, it also provided important insights into legitimacy.

The literature review and the case studies offer insights on the concept of legitimacy, and help identify dimensions and indicators to assess the legitimacy of existing collaborations.

These measures were integrated into the Collaboration Monitor, an online self-assessment tool for practitioners which allows users to assess and compare public sector collaborations and their impact on legitimacy and efficiency. Moreover, it explores the role played by Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in facilitating collaborations.

It offers the possibility to identify areas for improvement and to compare results with other collaborations in Europe.

This Policy Brief for policymakers, public managers and caseworkers focuses on the concept of legitimacy and aims to 1) present key findings, 2) share insights on the design and preliminary results from the Collaboration Monitor, and 3) provide recommendations on how to deal with legitimacy challenges.

A Policy Brief on defining and measuring efficiency was also published.
Understanding legitimacy: Key research findings

The delegation of power from people to politicians through regular and strictly regulated elections is the key source of legitimacy in electoral forms of democracy. Here, elected politicians are expected to exercise power through a public administration working according to stable rules and under the scrutiny of parliament, opposition, national audit institutions, ombudsmen, the media, etc. Thus, the throughput and output of the policymaking process are both strictly regulated and intensely monitored.

In contrast, the source of legitimacy in collaborative forms of governing is much less clear. One way to ensure legitimacy is internal. The actors directly involved in collaboration are expected to trust each other. External legitimacy entails that the external stakeholders accept the operations and results of the collaboration.

Scholars disagree on what makes a collaboration legitimate

Our literature review found two distinct and partially contradictory understandings of the relationship between legitimacy and collaboration.

The **electoral (political)** logic is generally very critical about collaboration because collaborations partially short-circuit the traditional mechanisms of legitimacy, notably political legitimacy obtained through elected political representatives of the people. Even if collaboration works within liberal democracy and its election mechanisms, its mode of operation and legitimacy depends more on the acceptance by the participants in the collaborations and their directly affected stakeholders than on the general electorate.

The **stakeholder** logic is generally more positive about the legitimacy effects of collaboration. This understanding values more the direct results coming out of the collaboration and the ability of these results to meet the needs of affected stakeholders. If the results are according to the expectations of the collaboration, legitimacy should also be high.

Our comparative case studies highlight legitimacy challenges

Our comparative case studies of accountability relations around the provision of long-term unemployment service in Belgium (Flanders), the UK (Scotland), Netherlands, Denmark, and Estonia pointed to three important findings.

**Substantive political legitimacy was rather low** in the sense that elected politicians kept a distance from service production and mainly contributed to the collaboration by securing a legal framework and financial resources and producing positive narratives about the collaboration. This rather shallow political legitimacy worked nicely in the early phases of the collaboration but turned out to be inadequate in the later phase.

**Quantitative performance measurement systems gauging the outputs of the services tended to inhibit the collaboration** by neglecting the actual progress made in the life situations of the unemployed. This inhibiting force was particularly strong in cases where public managers did not adopt a pragmatic attitude to the use of quantitative performance measurement regimes. Here, more substantive participation of and support from politicians may secure legitimacy in the eyes of the caseworker professionals and the citizens.

**The legitimacy of collaboration is often low in the eyes of the citizen** because the collaborative service production tends to suffer from an unclear double role of the citizen as both accountee and account-
Figure 1. Indicators of legitimacy in the Collaboration Monitor

holder. Ideally, the citizens should both be responsible for actively participating in the services seeking to help them, and at the same time their interests and suggestions on how best to be assisted should be taken seriously. This double-role is difficult to handle. Professionals and service providers often do not take the suggestions and feedback from the citizen seriously.

Assessing legitimacy: The Collaboration Monitor

The design of the legitimacy indicators in the Collaboration Monitor builds closely on the above findings. It assesses collaborations by using the policy-related stages of legitimacy: input, throughput, and output.

*Input legitimacy:* securing that people’s voice are heard in the design of policies

*Throughput legitimacy:* procedures ensuring that the policy-making process is transparent and follows established principles, notably legality and impartiality

*Output legitimacy:* the results of the collaboration. Often this points to immediate outputs from the collaboration, such as the provision of a service, but it may also point to the longer-term problem-solving effects, such as reducing unemployment and improving citizen health and well-being.

In each of these stages, the Collaboration Monitor assess collaborations using the two understandings or logics of collaboration: electoral (political) and stakeholder legitimacy.

By combining these dimensions, the Collaboration Monitor provides practitioners with six scores to assess the legitimacy of their collaborations: input (stakeholder), input (political), throughput (stakeholder), throughput (political), output (stakeholder), output (political).

The Collaboration Monitor was launched in October 2021. By mid-November 2021, 49 representatives of collaborations from ten European countries have used the tool, providing some first, tentative results.

Regarding legitimacy, all participants received relative high scores on average. Within the general image, we find some interesting variations:

*Input legitimacy:* Collaborations scored higher on the political input/electoral dimension, than the stakeholder one. This suggests that politicians still play a more important role than other stakeholders for securing input legitimacy

*Throughput legitimacy:* Collaborations operating at local or regional levels only
scored higher than collaborations working across political-administrative levels. This suggests that it may be more difficult to ensure transparency and adherence to agreed operating procedures across political-administrative levels.

**Output legitimacy:** Both the political and stakeholder types of legitimacy scored fairly high across different types of collaboration. This is a positive sign as it suggests that collaboration participants generally are happy with the results produced. Yet, it does not tell us how output legitimacy can be further improved.

*Figure 2. Average score on legitimacy of the participants (mid-November 2021)*

Recommendations

**Prudent use of performance indicators**

Our research shows that the frequent use of various quantifiable performance indicators is prone to create unintended effects, such as tunnel vision and reductionism. This problem stems from the frequent use of standardized accounts that reduce and overlook the complex realities. Public managers and, in particular, caseworkers should be involved in the design and continuous modification of the ICT systems that are used to provide performance information. Indicators should be designed and selected with great care and the results emanating from applying indicators should be interpreted cautiously by public managers. They should do so in dialogue with the employees delivering the services, and, if possible, with the citizens making use of the services.

**More substantive political participation**

We found that some collaborations suffer from superficial or missing participation of local politicians. This may result in limited political accountability and a weaker democratic legitimacy of the collaboration. In such cases, collaborations may be accused of reduced democratic support and thereby also lose support both from politicians and citizens. To amend this, we recommend that politicians meet with top public managers and with representatives of the caseworkers to explicate in what ways and how often they (the politicians) intend to discuss and provide feedback regarding the collaborative services and the results they produce.

**Attention to legitimacy of the collaborative service in the eyes of the client**

We also found that collaborative service production in some instances suffer from an unclear double role of the citizen-client as both accountee and account-holder. This double-role is difficult to handle, and professionals and service providers often do not take the suggestions and feedback from the citizen seriously. There is no easy way of navigating this. Still, public managers and frontline workers should consider how to ensure legitimacy of the collaborative service in the eyes of the client. By mobilizing citizen resources, both input and output legitimacy may be improved in the eyes of the client.

For more recommendations on collaborating in the digital era, see the [TROPICO White paper](#).

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