



# Linking the ‘meta-governance’ imperative to regional governance in resource communities



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## ABSTRACT

Critics of ‘the governance turn’ suggest that, in self-governing networks and hybrid governance arrangements, there remains an imperative for coordination and steering of governance institutions and processes. This is termed ‘meta-governance’. The dominant view in the meta-governance literature rejects the claim that states have been hollowed-out and maintains that governance still largely occurs through or by government. From this perspective it would appear that meta-governance, almost necessarily, is akin to central steering by the state. We support the small but growing body of scholarship that challenges this notion by claiming that meta-governance may in fact be exercised by any resourceful actor: public or private. We do so by interrogating the specific literature on regional policy and governance and the increasingly complex governance tasks that resource companies have taken on through their participation in an expanded scope of social policy issues. We show that, in the context of rural and remote communities, extractive resource companies have the potential to play a meta-governance role, and conclude by arguing that meta-governance is a significant, but under-explored topic in both rural governance and regional scholarship. We suggest that further research be undertaken to explore this private actor and their role in meta-governance.

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## 1. Introduction

The ‘state’ as a thematic interest is again in vogue. Growing dissatisfaction with the abstract character of previous state theory has stimulated renewed interest in research on the form and functions of states (Jessop, 2010). The theoretical and empirical agenda of much of this research is concerned with the claim that there has been a change in the pattern and exercise of state authority from government to that of ‘governance’ (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010). The notion of governance represents a movement away from the direct exercise of formal powers by the hierarchies of the nation-state, to situations where society is governed by a range of actors from the state, market and civil society (Rhodes, 1996). At a fundamental level, it implies that the context of policy making is changing and the solutions for problems associated with governing can no longer be found within the boundaries of sovereign government alone (Hajer, 2003). One implication of this relates to the ‘hollowing out’ of state capacity and authority. Yet an increasing

body of scholarship rejects the claim that states have been hollowed-out and maintains that governance still largely occurs through or by government (Bell and Hindmoor, 2009). These scholars posit that while states are becoming increasingly fragmented, they maintain significant influence in networks through the ‘government of governance’. From this perspective, the imperative for coordination and steering of governance institutions and processes, referred to as ‘meta-governance’, is for the state to maintain control (albeit indirect) in a situation of dispersed governance. Thus, rather than losing control to networks, governments have adopted ‘softer’ practices and tools that secure tight control within networked governance regimes (Whitehead, 2003). Governance networks are consequently said to always operate ‘in the shadow of hierarchy’ (Scharpf, 1994).

A new inflexion on this debate is that the governance of self-regulating governance networks, rather than being the sole domain of the state, may in fact ‘potentially be exercised by any resourceful actor - public or private’ (Sørensen, 2006, p. 103). Sørensen (2006, p. 103) proposes that ‘(a)ll it takes is resources and a desire to influence activities performed by self-governing actors’. Glasbergen (2011) goes so far as to suggest a new configuration of

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meta-governance whereby private actors and government become partners in the regulation of self-regulation, a notion which encourages governance studies to turn attention away from the capacity of government to meta-govern, to the various ways in which the inefficiencies and shortcomings of networks acting autonomously may be improved through the potential of the private sphere. This paper seeks to contribute to this debate by exploring the idea of a non-state meta-governor in one specific policy sector.

One set of private actors whose role in contemporary forms of governance has received considerable attention are mining and extractive resource companies. The involvement of private mining corporations in, and their influence over, governance has been a subject of growing theoretical interest for both scholars of rural governance and regional studies (Cheshire, 2010; Cheshire et al., 2011, 2014; Morrison et al., 2012). Yet the concept of meta-governance is an underexplored topic in literature on rural governance and resource communities. Likewise, few works in the public administration literature have attempted to examine meta-governance and its relationship to the constraints and potential of specific institutional settings, such as mineral and extractive resource policy (Kickert et al., 1997). This article argues that the few extant studies not only offer a compelling picture of mining companies and their involvement in governance of regional or remote areas, but also provide insight into the suggestion that such actors have the potential resources and a desire to meta-govern. It therefore seeks to perform these dual functions in order to contribute to the growing body of research which questions the orthodoxy that government has been 'eclipsed' by governance. We suggest using meta-governance as an alternative analytical lens to explore the balance of power between state and non-state actors (Stark, 2015) and to resolve increased institutional complexity in rural regions that continues to render the institutional form of governance illusive (Cheshire et al., 2014; Morrison, 2014).

The article proceeds as follows. First, we outline and review the existing literature that relates to the nature of contemporary meta-governance. We detail and examine the change from government to governance, a concept no longer limited to public policy and administration literature but now dominating contemporary debates across a number of different disciplines. We address the contested conceptualizations of meta-governance, which involve varying theoretical approaches regarding 'how' and through what means meta-governance is implemented, and indeed 'who' in fact meta-governs. Following this, we examine specific rural-studies based literature concerning the extractive resource industry and the increasingly complex governance tasks that companies have taken on through their integration in an expanded scope of governance. In demonstrating that meta-governance is a significant, but under-explored topic in literature on rural governance and resource communities, we turn to the field of political science and studies on 'private rule-making' to highlight some established examples of private meta-governance. This leads us to examine two examples of private meta-governance within the extractive resource industry: the Global Mining Initiative (GMI) and the Moranbah Cumulative Impacts Group (MCIG). The article concludes by highlighting prominent theoretical research gaps raised by the review, as well as providing some initial discussion around the normative implications of private meta-governance.

## 2. Governance and meta-governance

Much discussion within current governance literature revolves around the role and relations of political institutions in governance. The dominant line of thought adopts an 'interaction-centric' account of governance which posits that the proliferation of governance networks has weakened the state and its capacity to govern

(Taylor, 2000). Network governance is defined as 'relatively stable, horizontal articulations of interdependent but operationally autonomous actors' whose interactions are based on negotiation and the need to exchange resources in order to reach collective goals (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005, p. 197). Where the state was previously characterized as 'unified ... with a strong core executive' (Rhodes, 1997, p. 13), the increased involvement of a wide range of actors in governing has created multiple challenges to the capacity of the state to undertake policy implementation (Marinetti, 2003). In its most extreme form, interactive governance involves autonomous, self-organizing and coordinating networks 'not just influencing government policy, but taking over the business of government' (Stoker, 1998, p. 23).

A contrasting interpretation rejects the claim that states have been hollowed-out and maintains that governance still largely occurs through or by government (Bell and Hindmoor, 2009). This approach is labeled 'state-centric' and scholars of this domain focus on the argument that despite the complexity inherent in contemporary patterns of governance, states are not being 'eroded' (Rhodes, 1994, p. 138) and indeed, central government is still an important policy-making body (Peters and Pierre, 2006). Advocates of the state-centric approach do not deny the apparent increased influence of non-governmental actors in governance or that the nature of the governing process itself has been changing (Pierre and Peters, 2000). Rather, they highlight the ways in which the state and its authority remain resilient within the changing nature of governance. For example, reformative measures such as privatization and decentralization, rather than a loss of political control at the center, are interpreted as efforts by the state to concentrate capacity more effectively within central government and focus on its 'core executive functions' (Taylor, 2000, p. 51). Osborne and Gaebler (1992) define this role as involving less 'rowing' and more 'steering', the latter of which involves strategic management, goal setting, coordination and control of specific governance arrangements (Bell and Hindmoor, 2009, p. 47). In seeking to analytically approach this new and redefined role of government in societal governance, the concept of 'meta-governance' is thus receiving increasing research attention.

The theoretical notion of 'meta-governance' is used broadly to refer to an 'indirect form of governing that is exercised by influencing various processes of self-governance' (Sørensen, 2006, p. 100). From both interaction and state-centric perspectives, the imperative for meta-governance arises from the need to address the inherent problems of 'institutional complexity' that accompany networked modes of co-ordination, including organizational plurality, fragmentation and a lack of accountability and challenges of democratic legitimacy (Peters, 2009). Thus in order to develop the coherence that is necessary for the efficient functioning of governance networks, it is suggested that some level of institutional coordination and direction is therefore required (Sørensen, 2007; Thuesen, 2013). A number of bodies of work, across various disciplines, provide varying conceptual approaches as to how and in what form meta-governance is carried out. In seeking to draw together these disparate theoretical perspectives, this section will provide a systematic account of the contrasting strands of state-centric and interaction-centric research (Table 1). In order to develop a conceptual framework for understanding potential private meta-governance, we link these categorizations to suggested forms of private norms, rules, processes and resources emerging from recent scholarly interest in private governance, with the relationship to meta-governance explored in more detail later.

### 2.1. State-centric meta-governance

The term 'meta-governance' originally derives from the work of

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