
Research Paper

Urban Governance Facing Wicked Problems: Refining Meta-governance Theory through a Five-dimension Framework Based on Three Cases

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of an effective urban governance system, whereby the incompetence of traditional governance styles to deal with public health emergencies has been exposed, which appeals to designing and managing combinations of the traditional governance modes to achieve the best possible outcomes. Drawing on the meta-governance theory, this paper develops a five-dimension framework to re-conceptualize the theory in the face of wicked problems based on previous studies: multi-spatial coordination, reconfiguration of hierarchy, contribution of principle-based social autonomy, state-sponsored and supervised market force, and sound information sharing system. This paper further examined three cases with different institutional backgrounds: Milan, New York, and Shanghai. Despite that they had demonstrated some effective methods rooted, varying degrees of governance failure occurred in all three cities. Specifically, Milan received a severe hit due to the lack of reconfigured hierarchy and spatial coordination, New York City bore privatization of public services under unregulated market forces, and Shanghai experienced community chaos resulting from inefficient social networks. Thus, the paper concludes that the concept of meta-governance can only be implemented successfully when all the framework's sub-elements work together and coherently.

Keywords

Meta-governance, wicked problems, COVID-19, urban governance

1. Introduction

It has been nearly three years since the COVID-19 pandemic spread worldwide, during which we have witnessed changes in how society is governed and divergence between different countries' governance styles. The contingent and constitutive nature of this pandemic allow us to classify it as a “wicked problem” (Klasche, 2021), the most typical characteristic of which is that it is in constant change and cannot be clearly defined. Solutions for wicked problems, as scholars noted, are not true-or-false but good-or-bad (Head, 2019). It is because a wicked problem like the COVID-19 pandemic is generally linked with other problems and hard to separate by a single mode of solution attempt (Turnbull and Hoppe, 2019). Such a public health emergency has long gone beyond preventive medicine and hygiene but has posed a severe challenge to urban governance.

As the meaning of a wicked problem has manifested, a “scientific” approach to understanding the nature of these problems necessarily overlooks the significance of different stakeholder perspectives in the framing or constituting social problems (Head, 2008). Countries worldwide suffer to varying degrees from the shortcomings of different governance styles, which also provide opportunities for people to recognize the complexity of governance to develop acceptable solutions to the challenges. Therefore, this

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paper firstly combs the connotation of traditional governance, where the incompetence of hierarchical, market and network governance to deal with the wicked problem is discussed. Then, drawing on the meta-governance theory, this paper develops a five-dimension framework to refine the theory in the face of wicked problems. A study on three cases of Milan, New York, and Shanghai is presented afterward to illustrate why these dimensions are crucial and how their absence leads to failure, followed by the conclusion where the ways to develop sustainable governance methods are briefly discussed.

2. From governance to meta-governance: traditional governance styles and their discontents

2.1. Traditional governance styles facing the COVID-19 pandemic

Governance, as Jessop (2016a: 166) said, refers to mechanisms and strategies of coordination of complex reciprocal interdependence among operationally autonomous actors, organizations, and functional systems. While governance styles could be defined as “the processes of decision-making and implementation, including how the organizations involved relate to each other” (Van Kersbergen and Van Waarden, 2009). Historically, hierarchical governance, market governance, and network governance are three traditional governance styles (Meuleman, 2010; Olsen et al., 2021), and they differ in the subjects, procedures, ideas, and foundations of the political philosophy of governance.

Hierarchical governance usually draws upon a state-centred approach. It often involves the government taking action in a top-down manner (Pahl-Wostl, 2019), which is vital in terms of control, lines of command, clarity of responsibility, reliability, and elaborated planning systems (Meuleman and Niestroy, 2015). Within this governance style, authority is the core, and compliance and mandatory are necessary for achieving results. The market style of governance takes a more decentralized, hands-off approach to problem-solving and public management (Thompson, 2003), which values efficiency, time, and also individual responsibility. Price is the core of this governance style based on individualism, where credit, competition, and award play the most critical role. Market governance enjoys most popularity in Anglo-Saxon countries (Meuleman, 2010). The network style of governance prevailed relatively late in the 1980s and is rooted in European societies especially in Nordic regions (Treib et al., 2007). It relies on flat organizational structures and networks to coordinate activities, where trust is the central principle in consensus-seeking deliberation. All these governance styles are not clearly separated but interact with each other (figure 1).

However, traditional governance styles have failed to address wicked problems due to their inherent "structural contradictions, strategic dilemmas" (Jessop, 2002: 240). In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, massive negative externalities under both hierarchical and market governance-dominated systems have been exposed. Under hierarchies, the government was pinning its hopes on a complete toolbox to tackle the problem at all levels with technical solutions (Sowman et al., 2021). Under the market-dominated governance, exacerbated social inequity and resource allocation maladjustment made some situations more challenging. The networks showed severe delays resulting from endless debate and mediation, although they enjoyed higher identity and consensus. The governance of a wicked problem cannot be fruitful if only a single part of the complex organizational setup (Klasche, 2021). The outlet of a sustainable governance style for urban wicked problems shall lie in the mix of different systems (Klasche, 2021), namely meta-governance.

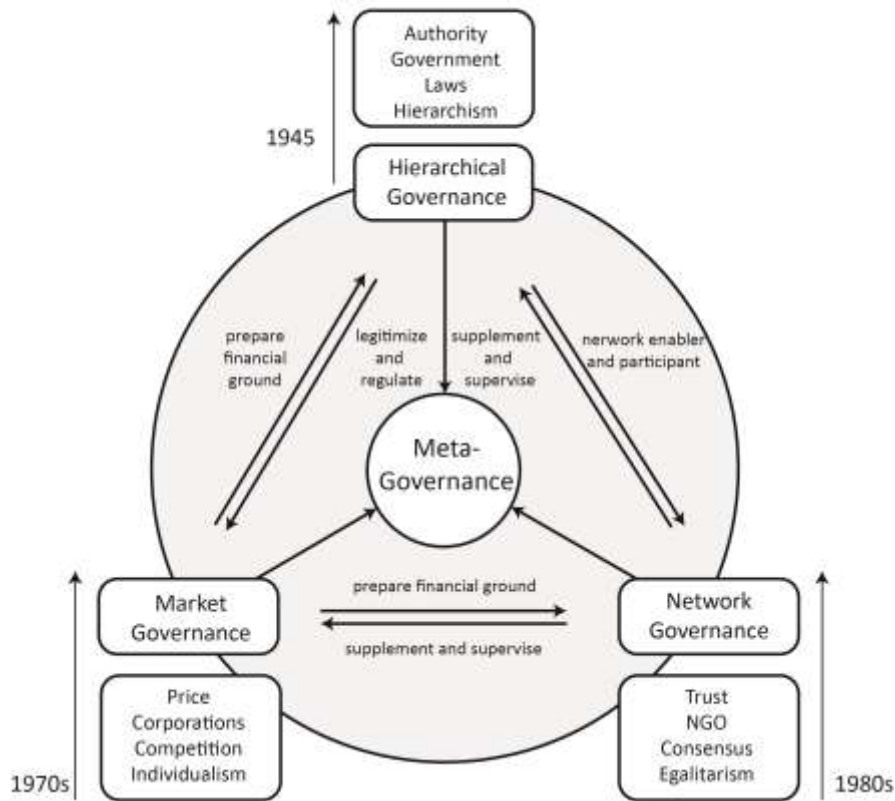


Figure 1. Traditional governance styles and their characters. Source: illustrated by the author according to Meuleman 2008, 2015; Olsen et al., 2021.

2.2. Meta-governance

Meta-governance is raised by Jessop (1998; 2004) for “coordinating different forms of governance and ensuring a minimal coherence among them.” It aims to make network, market, and hierarchical governance work together in a particular way for a particular situation and allows for different governance at different levels (Meuleman and Niestroy, 2015), and is further defined by Kooiman(2003) as third-order governance invoking normative ideals in the governing of institutional systems of governance (second order), and in turn governing the way concrete policy problems and policy opportunities are governed (first order). The essence of meta-governance is that the one-size-fits-all model is impossible. In meta-governance, pluricentric negotiations, unicentric command, and multicentric competition are combined by meta-governors to achieve balanced, flexible, and fair results.

Compared with traditional governance styles, meta-governance steps back and allow the switch from one to governance style dominance. Thus the concept of collaboration is crucial (Sørensen and Torfing, 2009), where the flexible adjustment of policy solutions in the face of changing demands, conditions, and preferences is essential. Moreover, as it needs to coordinate different governors on different levels, the means of space, territory, and time are brought back and highlighted (Jessop, 2016b), creating a critical bridge between public management and urban area planning.

However, scholars have noticed that the operation modes of meta-governance are as complex and dynamic as their connotations (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). The very general terms such as “the governance of governance” or “the organization of self-organization” (Jessop, 1998; Kooiman and Jentoft, 2009) does not give clear guidance on how the traditional governance mode should be adjusted and connected and how the space-time elements should work. It is impossible to make a clear and universal

explanation of such a fluid "postmodern" concept, but the theory can be framed under certain situations. Combining the analysis of governance failure and literature review on meta-governance, this paper raised a five-dimension framework to put a specific spin on this theory in the context of wicked problems.

3. Refining meta-governance through a five-dimension framework

3.1. Multi-spatial coordination

The first dimension is about spatial governance, as the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the issue of space back into focus. Scholars have noted that space is both an *object* and a *means* of governance (Jessop, 2016b; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009; Martin, 2015). The "space of flow" brought by the information era, on the one hand, underpins trans-regional economic development and knowledge exchange, while on the other, it undermines government sovereignty and controllability, especially under emergent circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The divergence and dilemmas brought by different subjects' incomplete understanding of the situation require a spatial refinement of the governance units to divide an overarching field into controllable segmentations and make things manageable.

Such pursuit could be regarded as a process of (re-)territorialisation. This ensembles what scholars term "spatiotemporal envelopes" to render actors satisfactorily govern a series of relevant features (Fisker et al., 2022; Delaney, 2008). As Fisker (2022) noted, to render a spatiotemporal envelope governable is to territorialize it and coordinate the cohesion between different spatial governance units. For instance, issuing border restrictions, limiting travel, imposing visa controls to frame the virus within a liminal space, enacting new rules for cross-regional flow, and dividing the regional governance grid have the potential to better articulate power and space.

3.2. Reconfiguration of hierarchy

The reconstruction of governance units directly requires the reconfiguration of hierarchy. State-entered public administration theories argue that the public sector cannot be seen as one unitary whole that speaks with one tongue and moves in one unanimous direction (Sørensen, 2006). "Defects" built by liberalized local governments to cut-off cross-regional influence might lead the process of territorialisation to the reverse extreme of fragmentation. Such potential threats demand the higher government to "scale up" to form a unified governance idea (Cui and Yuan, 2022), whereby the local governments carry out specific measures according to their locality.

Another pressing issue facing the reconfiguration of hierarchy is the relationship between network and market forces. In the face of wicked problems, social demands for public goods and commodities tend to surge, which can neither be fairly distributed through the standard market allocation nor NGOs. It is, of course, difficult and dangerous for the authority to replace the independent decision-making of the other stakeholders, but the government can influence and guide them by adequately managing information and strategic procedures. Local governments must work with multi-actors as partners rather than perceiving them as subordinates (Gao and Yu, 2020). It is worth noting that none of this entails a retreat of the state but rather a re-distribution of its role while remaining in the driving seat (Fisker et al., 2022; Bell and Hindmoor, 2009). The main challenge of the local governments is their professional ability to mediate.

3.3. Contribution of principle-based social autonomy

Self-organizing networks of actors from civil society are an essential dimension of meta-governance, which are high in trust and inclusion and are open to "win-win" solutions, but they may

sometimes result in endless talks without reaching conclusions (Fransen, 2015). A governance network is a multi-center system rather than a mono-centre system (Van Kersbergen and Van Waarden, 2009), which begins with identifying relevant policy problems and ends with building capacities for future cooperation. The efficiency, capacity, and operability are three key challenges facing horizontal network governance, while rules and principles would make consent better implementable. When facing wicked problems, unified objectives and principles are particularly important to avoid unnecessary waste of time on decision making. All network governance subjects should agree on action targets, principles, boundaries, and information before and during their actions. Social autonomy, with this regard, should "step back" and receive deployment from hierarchy when it comes to decision-making and objective construction while simultaneously "step forward" in practical actions. Such principle-based network governance corresponds with Scharpf's (1994) conclusion that networks are embedded in a hierarchical structure and the government has the power to approve and disapprove negotiated outcomes.

3.4. State-sponsored and supervised market forces

Well-functioning markets and flatter management modes usually require a time-consuming and resource-demanding regulation (Dean, 1999). They are exposed as lacking clear structure, reliability, and accountability when a problem is (suddenly) reframed to a complex and unstructured state (Farazmand, 2004). Such deficiencies have caused wild market swings in countries with a large proportion of market regulation, such as South Korea, whose table prices have risen 34.8% since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020 (Bae, 2020). Therefore, to refine the market governance from the point of meta-governance is to impose more guidance and regulations on the liberal forces. State sponsorship by the government, or what Sørensen (2006) termed "hands-on support and facilitation," is crucial to maintain fairness and stability of the market and activate the passive groups of actors who do not in advance have the necessary political resources, competencies, and efficacies to obtain influence. Meta-governors participating in this process should be substantively neutral and not "seek to achieve his or her objectives" (Sørensen and Torfing, 2007). Supervision is also imperative, where the government needs to be keenly aware of potential threats such as price gouging and enact relevant policies in advance to deal with possible market failure and negative externalities.

3.5. Sound information sharing system

Meta-governance, in its essential objective, is aimed to produce a certain degree of collaborative governance in various subjects (Meuleman, 2008; Jessop, 2004). A timely, clear, and effective information-sharing system is decisive throughout the process. Information disclosure and sharing are not only the plain background for the technical operation of governance strategies but also serve as the required field and intermediary of communication and coordination among the three governance methods. Compared to a one-size-fits-all information domination channel, a more inclusive, rather than exclusive, governance mechanism could better help distinguish false information from true. In this process, the mechanism of public opinion guidance, making decisions, and implanting policies shall be reconstructed systematically (Gao and Yu, 2020). The flow of information could also alleviate the temporary closure and isolation caused by emergent territorialisation and, on the other hand, provides practical and immediate guidance and feedback to the first element of this framework, namely multi-spatial coordination.

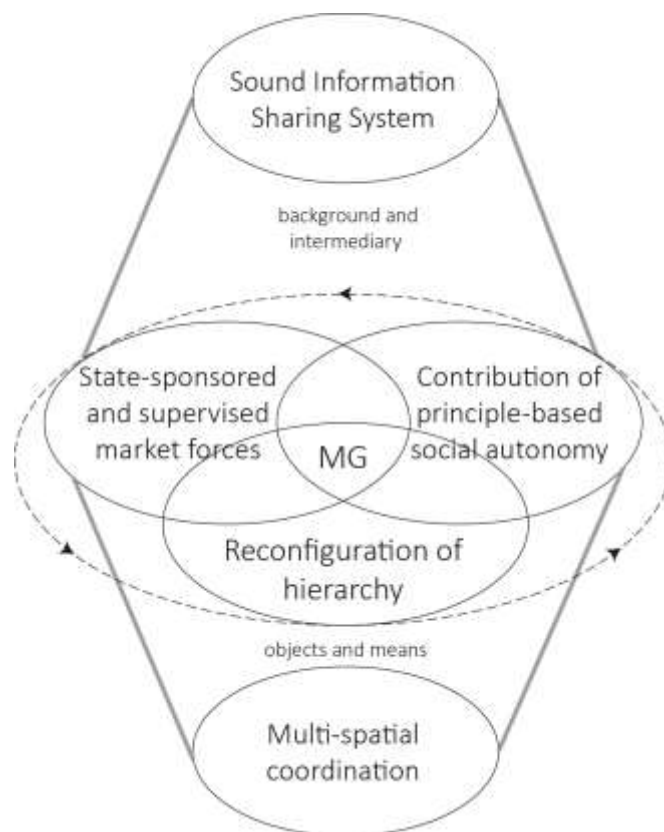


Figure 2. The five dimensions of meta-governance in the face of wicked problems. Source: illustrated by the author.

4. Case studies

4.1 Milan: Lack of reconfigured hierarchy

In February 2020, Lombardy became the first region outside China to experience a significant outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of reported infections in Lombardy increased from 990 in February to 43,869 in March (38.7% of the total in Italy). Milan's hospitals were soon overwhelmed, and the number of COVID-19-related deaths in the Lombardy region reached 16,262 in May (50.4%) (ISTAT-ISS, 2021).

Milan government's response to the epidemic was gradual and slow. Milan and ten other cities in northern Italy were quarantined after 14 cases were confirmed in Lombardy on February 21. On March 8, the Italian Health Minister issued a new decree to extend the most restrictive measures to Lombardy and other provinces in central and northern Italy, isolating 16 million people (Lowen, 2020).

At the peak of COVID-19, the mayor of Milan and his elite bureaucrats found themselves dealing with unexpected problems in a severe health emergency. The COVID-19 health emergency has prompted Italy to strengthen the authority of government leaders, but the authority under the emergency state originating from the hierarchical system is still indirect (Chen and Wu, 2020). Even with the enormous power granted by Testo Unicode *Degli Enti Locali* (TUEL), mayor Giuseppe Sala still relied on negotiation and cooperation with the domestic community in coordinating local governance participants and providing new public services (such as food and sanitation provision) and other emergencies (Nabatchi et al., 2017).

The decentralized, multi-level, and multi-participant local social governance network based on the voluntary cooperation mode in Milan was the primary medium of government actions (Sancino et al., 2021). Many Lombardy mayors said that "clear and continuous communication with the citizens has become a top priority" (Garavaglia et al., 2021). Local association networks joined the governance system, such as National Alpini Association (a paramilitary organization), student union, the Catholic Church and other non-governmental organizations, providing critical support for implementing epidemic prevention policies (Perrone, 2020). For example, the Catholic Church took the initiative to play the role of disaster relief and spiritual comfort. While the governmental medical institutions were treating the patients, the priests risked performing the final ceremony outside the hospital bedside and in the family bedroom for the dying (Horowitz and Povoledo, 2020). In the COVID-19 epidemic, just like in other social crises since the classic period, the developed social network of Milan has undertaken the main work of urban governance.

However, Milan and Lombardy, the wealthiest region in Italy with considerable economic autonomy and strong community networks, still received the most brutal hit. The above-mentioned social cohesion cannot cover the incompetence of the hierarchical system and the weakness of the cross-regional governance system. Milan has hardly received any direct help from the national government during the epidemic, while the unified coordination and assistance of the high-level government are indispensable. COVID-19 is not a problem that urban governance can cope with since urban authorities and local governance networks cannot bear the high blockade costs alone. After the lockdown of Milan, hundreds of thousands of people fled to the southern provinces, which made COVID-19 spread to Italy. The lesson of Milan proved that a solid social network and local government could not deal with the COVID-19 crisis alone without help from hierarchical multi-spatial governance.

4.2 New York: Tragedy under unregulated market forces

New York State was the initial epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in the United States. By August 2022, New York State, with a population of 19.5 million, has reported a total of 6,038,801 infections, of which 70,951 died. In New York State, the first covid-19 case was reported on February 29, 2020, and the first death case was reported on March 11, 2020. Two weeks after the first confirmed case, the public health authorities acted to restrict people's movement by closing restaurants, bars, and schools (Tangcharoensathien et al., 2021). The mayor of New York also declared a state of emergency, restricting public gatherings and urging people to stay at home when symptoms (such as fever and cough) occur and seek testing if they are sick (Olson et al., 2020). However, these measures were not strict enough to control the pandemic, as seen by the rapid spread of infection.

The politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic, where Governor Cuomo and President Trump were hostile to each other over the severity of the epidemic in New York, worsened the situation (Rocco et al., 2020). The New York State services reached their ceiling quickly, leading to long queues and limited access to treatment, while the federal government refused to support the mitigation work in New York. The contradictory statements between the Governor of State and the Mayor of the City also reflected the long-standing internal opposition within the local government, which became evident in the surge of COVID-19 cases (Times, 2020). New York City faced governance failure in many aspects: lack of federal government support for expanding laboratory capacity and limiting the spread of the virus, state authorities competing with the urban public health system, and the city government's unwillingness to take coercive measures, resulting in the epidemic prevention in New York becoming a disaster (Wang et al., 2021).

The excessive marketization of public services in New York has brought more serious problems. The fragmented private health care system in the US has been unprepared for the pandemic since early

March (Kettl, 2020). Market competition among private medical providers hindered efforts to expand hospital capacity and ensure critical supplies such as respirators, personal protective equipment and testing reagents. "It is like bidding for a ventilator on eBay with 50 other states," complained New York governor Andrew Cuomo (Smith, 2020). Unfortunately, the Trump government refused to coordinate procurement or invoke the power under the Defence Production Act of 1950 to increase supply, although the shortage of PPE has seriously affected efforts to protect vulnerable nursing homes.

The unregulated free market and the privatization of public services have led to the majority of disadvantaged groups being unable to receive essential assistance in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ethnically, the number of deaths among black and Latino populations is disproportionately high (Sam, 2020). Geographically, Queens, New York City, including many low-income and immigrant families, suffered heavy losses in the first wave of the COVID-19 epidemic because these poor residents lived in overcrowded houses with multiple generations, bearing a more significant burden of potential comorbidities such as diabetes, and had fewer beds available (Al Saidi et al., 2020). The over-inflated and unregulated market, together with hostile governments and inefficient social organizations, pushed New York City under the COVID-19 epidemic into a disaster of urban governance.

4.2 Shanghai: Chaos with inefficient networks

Starting in late February 2022, a wave of COVID-19 infection rapidly spread in Shanghai. As of July 2, Shanghai reported 58,139 local confirmed cases and 591,518 asymptomatic infections. On March 28, Shanghai began implementing a closed management batch (lockdown). Before this pandemic, Shanghai was regarded as the role model for all Chinese cities in epidemic prevention, relying on targeted control and market regulation (Ma and Bao, 2022). When the pandemic began, Shanghai quickly stepped up efforts to centralize its management under solid authority. Although this overarching strategy ultimately succeeded in bringing the outbreak under control, the lack of "governance in the last 100 meters" (Mao, 2022) still caused chaos in communities, including medical suspensions, disrupted supply chains, and hoarding-profiteering.

Shortages of food and medicine in Shanghai have caused the public to complain about the restrictions, and people were seeking alternative help (Zi, 2022). But the networks themselves were not sufficient and efficient; as a resident said, "There were not many organizations to help¹." This dilemma was due to the looseness and fragility of Shanghai's social organization itself, and also the one-size-fits-all policy of authorities where horizontal networks are administratively *incorporated* into hierarchical powers rather than articulated. Firstly, Fenxia (2022: 11) stated that the cooperation between communities and organizations, and agencies outside the community in Shanghai were weak. The government bears the most responsibility in the risk management system, including resource assurance, technical support, and disaster risk management (Lai and Wang, 2022). About a month after the lockdown, the residents of some communities "completely abandoned the neighbourhood committee, and began to buy products in groups and open the era of autonomy" (Xing, 2022). Some original social organizations were abolished for their slowness of action and limited ability to allocate resources.

On the other hand, the robust control by the authority also suspended the efficacy of social networks and market forces. As a resident, Mr. Li said:

¹ An interview with Mr. Wu who lives in Yangpu District, was conducted on July 25.

The governors in the community are responsible to the top, and they do what the top (street and district authorities) says. There are a lot of real complications that the top-down policy cannot deal with, and the result is out of touch with reality².

The tough situation could also be heard in a conversation where the neighbourhood committee director complained to an old man about his disability to help because he had to follow the restrictions (Li, 2022). In coping with the sudden pandemic, the governments did not "scale up" and devolve power to community autonomy, which became barriers to quick and accurate adjustments according to the timeliest situation. The emergence of the unprecedented "giving-up group" also undermined the consensus of community actions, which further distracted the authorities and social networks.

The chaos in Shanghai demonstrated the indispensability of broad, practical, consensus-based social organization participation in governance. When the governance mode changes from the ordinary style to strong authoritative governance, the matching social networks become the essential links between the top-down strategy and the bottom-up reality, as well as the imperative action executor. Cities that fail to do so, such as Shanghai, are vulnerable.

5. Discussion

From the three cases above, we have demonstrated from the opposing side that the absence of any one of market, hierarchy, and network forces, combined with the contingent insufficient multi-spatial cohesion and information sharing, will lead to the City's failure in dealing with wicked problems. However, in the context of COVID-19, we have not found a successful case that could positively confirm the success of meta-governance. Thus the adequacy of these five dimensions needs to be further tested. Another question regards the universality and consistency of the meta-governance theory. As scholars have noted, the geographical focus of previous meta-governance research is very concentrated in a small number of countries, most of which are Nordic countries (Gjaltema et al., 2020). Therefore, the applicability of meta-governance theory outside European democracies is uncertain. In the cases of this article, we didn't deliberately distinguish the structural differences between democracies and the authorities. It is assumed that in an ideal situation, the market, the hierarchy, and the network may be integrated under the meta-governance theory in different regimes, but this assumption is suspicious. Ironically, from the perspective of the achievements of epidemic prevention, although bad performances exist in all three cases, the number of infections and deaths in liberal democratic Milan and New York are far more significant than those in Shanghai. Authoritarian Shanghai, where the government had absolute power, realized the absolute epidemic control under the condition of a weak network and market. On the contrary, both New York, with strong market forces, and Milan, with a strong social network, finally failed to control. This result forces us to think about whether the three governance modes under the meta-governance should have a similar proportion. Should the role of the network and market be far weaker than that of the government?

6. Conclusion

Urban wicked problems demand a transformation of traditional governance styles. Meta-governance entails the coordination of governments, other public bodies, and the private sectors by using different instruments, methods, and strategies, which is a theory that is potentially helpful in coping with wicked urban problems. Based on previous studies and the covid-19 pandemic, this paper develops a five-dimension framework to re-conceptualize the theory in the face of wicked problems,

² An interview with Martin who lives in Hongkou District, conducted on May 20.

which necessity is further illustrated by the Milan, New case studies York, and Shanghai. When some of the elements over-dominated the governance system and crowded out the participation and coordination of other dimensions, the overall governance might fail. This leads to the conclusion that the concept of meta-governance can only be successfully implemented when all sub-elements work interdependently and coherently. However, we should also further rethink the roots of meta-governance and acknowledge that the adequacy of this framework, as few cases covered all the aspects, is still up in the air while the proportion of each dimension in this framework is neither universal but should be rooted in the historical context of different regions and cultural backgrounds. All of these deficiencies are waiting for more in-depth empirical research.

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