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Maintaining Collective Legitimacy During Crisis: A Case of Social Enterprise Intermediaries in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Existing research offers little insight into how governance networks can maintain their legitimacy during institutional disruption. Through an in-depth case study of a network of third sector organizations in Scotland that worked to deliver government funds and support during the COVID-19 pandemic to social enterprises and charities, this paper sheds light on this topic. Our analysis highlights the importance of work to retain the structure of the network by affirming mission focus and rules of collaboration, promoting and aligning the network with external stakeholders, and building and breaking relationships. We propose a conceptual model illustrating how these efforts to maintain legitimacy interact dynamically, demonstrating that successful network management during crises relies on the collective ability to adapt to evolving pressures. These insights contribute to the extant research on network governance and institutional maintenance.

1 | Introduction

Collaborative action between networks of public, private, and third sector organizations is seen as a particularly effective means of delivering public services (Klijn 2008; Klijn and Koppenjan 2016; Sørensen and Torfing 2018). It is believed that engagement and collaboration with and between multiple actors can provide greater understanding of social problems, increase innovation in public services, and promote democratic participation in decision-making (Hartley et al. 2013; Sørensen and Torfing 2018). However, these networks are often characterized by power asymmetries, conflicting stakeholder interests, and competing regulatory demands, which can undermine their ability to function effectively (Elgin 2015; Provan and Kenis 2008). Resultingly, this can challenge the field-level[1] legitimacy of governance networks and question their taken-for-granted position within public service institutions[2] (Johnston et al. 2011; Mosley and Wong 2021; Triantafillou and Hansen 2022).

Governance networks are defined as "more or less stable patterns of social relations between mutually dependent actors, which cluster around a policy problem, a policy programme, and/or a set of resources and which emerge, are sustained, and are changed through a series of interactions" (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016, 11). Legitimacy is particularly crucial in governance networks because their ability to function effectively depends on both internal and external validation (Mosley and Wong 2021; Provan and Kenis 2008). Internally, networks require trust, inclusive decision-making, and clear roles among participating actors (Emerson et al. 2012). Externally, they must demonstrate their "institutional fit" to funders, policymakers, and the communities they serve (Durant and Ali 2013). These challenges were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted existing public service institutions, intensified political scrutiny of public service delivery, heightened community needs, and increased public reliance on third sector organizations (Ansell et al. 2021; Christensen and Lægreid 2020; Huang 2020).

Existing studies often treat legitimacy as something that is either retained or lost during institutional disruption, overlooking the strategic and deliberate actions organizations can take to sustain

it (Deephouse and Suchman 2008). This is particularly the case in governance network research, which tends to emphasize collaborative efficiency while underestimating the ongoing strategic work performed by key network actors (Christensen and Lægreid 2020; Mizrahi et al. 2021). Intermediary organizations[3] can have a particularly important role in maintaining field-level legitimacy as they occupy key institutional positions, linking government policy, service implementation organizations, local communities, and service users together (Mosley 2014; Shea 2011). However, there is a lack of research exploring how these intermediary organizations actively manage simultaneous stakeholder pressures, including policymakers demanding compliance with regulations, social enterprises seeking adaptable funding mechanisms, and communities expecting rapid and equitable resource distribution (Mizrahi et al. 2021; Ansell et al. 2021). Failure to manage these tensions effectively can challenge field-level legitimacy. In this article, we aim to address this gap by asking: *how do intermediaries actively maintain the legitimacy of governance networks during institutional disruption?*

This is a particularly important research question to address as maintaining legitimacy is important for assembling resources, operation efficiency, and scaling policy agenda (Ansell and Torfing 2015; Deephouse and Suchman 2008; Provan and Kenis 2008). Indeed, the research evidence indicates that governance arrangements that maintained higher perceptions of legitimacy generally achieved a higher level of "success" during the pandemic (Christensen and Lægreid 2020; Robinson et al. 2021). To explore our research question, we draw on an institutional work perspective which emphasizes the purposeful actions and instances of agency that are enacted to shape "taken-for-granted beliefs" which in turn create, disrupt, and maintain institutions (Dacin et al. 2010; Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Wright et al. 2021). We apply these insights to an in-depth inductive case study (Gioia et al. 2013) of a social enterprise network in Scotland. This network includes government agencies, local authorities, social enterprises, and crucially third sector intermediary organizations who cluster around policy and funding to support social enterprises. Several intermediaries played a key role in the implementation of the Scottish Government Action Plan 2020–2021 by delivering emergency funds to social enterprises, volunteer groups, neighborhood associations, and charities during the pandemic (Scottish Government 2022).

By understanding the micro-level role of intermediaries, we provide insight into how field-level legitimacy was maintained during institutional disruption (Dacin et al. 2010). Our findings and analysis advance existing understanding of legitimacy maintenance by showing how actors respond to both individual and collective agency threats. We detail the structural and signaling work that intermediaries do to retain both internal and external legitimacy, and the key underpinning role that relational work plays in the process. Our findings make contributions to the literature on network governance by detailing the key role intermediaries play in actively maintaining field-level legitimacy (Christensen and Lægreid 2020; Mosley and Wong 2021; Provan and Kenis 2008). We also contribute to the current institutional maintenance literature by elucidating the complex interaction between individuals, collectives, and their

coercive, normative, and reparative work (Lawrence et al. 2013; Xiao and Klarin 2021).

2 | Theoretical Background

2.1 | Legitimacy in Governance Networks

Governance networks contain actors operating at multiple levels across the public, private, and third sector who organize around a specific policy problem that cannot be solved by one actor alone (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016). As such, the participating stakeholders in governance networks are autonomous yet interdependent of one another, where the actions of one actor affect the interests of another (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016). This ultimately makes a governance network "complex" as each actor can have a different perception of a policy problem or solution (Agranoff 2006; McGuire and Agranoff 2011). Consequently, governance networks require "managing" which is defined as "the deliberative strategies aimed at facilitating and guiding the interactions and/or changing the features of the network with the intent to further the collaboration within the network processes" (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016, 11).

Effective network management, however, does not inherently guarantee legitimacy; rather, legitimacy is an ongoing process that requires active maintenance. The actors within governance networks must continuously align with wider stakeholder expectations, demonstrate credibility, and adapt to changing regulatory and political environments (Deephouse and Suchman 2008). Even well-managed networks face persistent legitimacy risks due to competing stakeholder interests, accountability pressures, and evolving institutional norms (Maron and Benish 2022; Provan and Kenis 2008).

Legitimacy is defined within the wider organization studies literature as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman 1995, 574). Generally, organizations (including governance networks) require legitimacy to access resources and operate effectively (Deephouse and Suchman 2008; Provan and Kenis 2008). Organizations gain legitimacy by conforming to institutionalized rules, norms, and expectations in their field (Deephouse and Suchman 2008; Meyer and Rowan 1977). These rules, norms, and expectations are actively constructed, negotiated social perceptions contingent on cultural alignment and audience interpretation (Beaton et al. 2021; Deephouse and Suchman 2008; Smets et al. 2015).

Within the public sector literature, it is established that governance networks require maintaining both internal and external perceptions of legitimacy (Provan and Kenis 2008). Internal legitimacy is generally achieved through trust, equal participation, inclusive decision-making, and the distribution of power (Choi and Robertson 2014; Emerson et al. 2012; Mosley and Wong 2021; Purdy 2012). Similarly, external legitimacy is achieved when citizens and external actors view collaborative means of delivering public services as credible

TABLE 1 | Institutional tensions faced by intermediaries in governance networks that challenge field-level legitimacy.

Tension	Description	Example
Individualism	Governance networks require collective commitment, yet individual organizations may prioritize their own agenda (Purdy 2012).	Intermediary organizations such as a national advocacy body may prioritize its own funding needs over gaining funding for the collective.
Politicization	Governance networks must balance the competing needs for stakeholder inclusiveness and strategic alignment with policy objectives (Kirschbaum 2015).	Funders can impose conditions that marginalize smaller network actors from participation.
Regulation	Governance networks can operate using informal practice but must also comply with formal policies and procedures (Erikson and Larsson 2022).	An intermediary delivering public funds must adhere to government reporting requirements but also meet the immediate needs of those who need their services.

(Dupuy and Defacqz 2022; Durant and Ali 2013; Lee and Esteve 2023). Often, the need to balance both internal and external legitimacy causes tension between participating actors (Provan and Kenis 2008). This happens when building external legitimacy that may be beneficial to the overall network may not be beneficial to an individual organization (Maron and Benish 2022). For example, a government contract to deliver a service may mandate a specific way of working antithetical to the existing ways that actors work together or may require one organization within the network to take a "lead role" placing them in a position of power over other organizations in the network (Provan and Kenis 2008).

These tensions are arguably more acute during periods of institutional disruption. Research conducted during COVID-19 praised the effectiveness of collaborative networks in crisis response by enabling diverse partnerships, timely mobilization, and gaining public trust (Cheng et al. 2020; Mizrahi et al. 2021; Robinson et al. 2021). For example, Norway's perceived crisis success was attributed to collaborative decision-making, which provided democratic legitimacy alongside government capacity (Christensen and Lægreid 2020). While this literature highlights the benefits of collaborative approaches taken to adapt to disruption to public services, less is known about the management of existing governance networks during institutional disruption. Specifically, the role of key actors in maintaining field-level legitimacy during shifting rules, norms, and expectations.

2.2 | The Role of Intermediaries in Governance Networks

Intermediaries occupy crucial institutional positions, bridging government policymakers, service delivery organizations, communities, and users (Mosley 2014; Shea 2011). They are therefore characterized by having overlapping roles when interacting with public service providers, service users, and other network actors (Haug 2024). They can provide additional capacity to public service providers and advise policy decision-makers (Sørensen and Torfing 2018); they can play lead roles in coordinating governance networks and other network actors activities (Poocharoen and Ting 2015); and they can provide information to service users and represent their interests when interacting with public service providers (Mazzei et al. 2020). Effectively, their role is to mediate between government mandates, network actors, and

service users, ensuring that governance processes align with stakeholder expectations (Tsukamoto and Nishimura 2006).

These boundary-spanning positions, however, harbor inherent institutional tensions which challenge field-level legitimacy and subsequently require efforts to balance (O'leary and Vij 2012). Summarized in Table 1, these overlapping tensions include issues over individualism, politicization, and regulation which challenge established and shared meanings of collaborative work. First, governance networks are underpinned by shared understanding, collective values, inclusion, and collaborative practice, yet actors may prioritize individual organizational survival over network-wide goals (e.g., Mosley 2014). Individual action, therefore, can conflict with social practices that are deemed legitimate at a field-level and can disrupt institutions, such as when an intermediary organization can use their position of influence to secure government funds for themselves as opposed to advancing a collective agenda (Purdy 2012).

Second, intermediaries must mediate between state-mandated objectives, their own organizational goals, and frontline operational realities (Kirschbaum 2015). Government funders often demand strict accountability measures, which may limit network adaptability, responsiveness, and exclude certain stakeholders from participation (Shea 2011). Finally, while governance networks operate in informal and adaptive ways, they remain subject to formal regulatory frameworks (Euchner 2022). Intermediaries must reconcile bureaucratic requirements with localized, discretionary practices to maintain both regulatory compliance and stakeholder trust, ensuring continued legitimacy (Provan and Kenis 2008).

By adjudicating these tensions that emerge due to their unique institutional positioning, intermediaries also have a pivotal role in stabilizing governance networks, ensuring that their activities are perceived as legitimate across multiple audiences. As such, intermediaries must continuously negotiate their credibility and authority, ensuring that field-level legitimacy is maintained by aligning the expectations of diverse stakeholders (Maron and Benish 2022). This includes policymakers demanding compliance with regulations, social enterprises seeking adaptable funding mechanisms, and communities expecting rapid and equitable resource distribution (Mizrahi et al. 2021; Ansell et al. 2021). However, while the role of intermediaries in maintaining the legitimacy of

specific institutionalized practices is noted, we do not know specifically how they do this through deliberative actions during periods of institutional disruption.

2.3 | An Institutional Work Perspective on Maintaining Governance Network Legitimacy

For our conceptual framework we draw on the concept of institutional work which is concerned with the agency of both individual and collective actors in pursuing their interests in institutional contexts (Lawrence et al. 2009). This approach places importance on the concept of legitimacy, where organizations must demonstrate they conform to societal expectations which include legal requirements, social norms, and cultural-cognitive frames of reference (Scott 1995). The creation and maintenance of legitimacy, therefore, is an important concept in understanding how institutions are shaped and how organizations (or governance networks) survive within institutional fields by demonstrating appropriate, acceptable, or valid beliefs and behaviors (Bitektine 2011).

There are three broad categories of institutional work which often involve efforts to create, maintain, or disrupt the legitimacy of new or existing practices and norms (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). Work aimed at creating institutions involves establishing new governance structures, roles, and practices to gain legitimacy in evolving institutional fields, often by modifying existing norms to accommodate emerging demands (Zietsma and Lawrence 2010). Work aimed at disrupting institutions entails challenging, dismantling, or contesting dominant norms and structures that constrain institutional adaptation, leading to reconfigurations of legitimacy arrangements (Greenwood et al. 2011). Finally, work aimed at maintaining institutions involves protecting institutional resources, co-opting groups into compliance, or resisting efforts of institutional change by holding on to established practices, beliefs, and cultural norms.

The existing public sector literature has been predominantly focused on exploring how individuals can influence policy reform and regulatory change within an organizational setting (Cloutier et al. 2016; Fossestøl et al. 2015; Pemer and Skjølsvik 2018). Here, specific actors interpret, translate, and adapt institutional logics to enact changes in organizational processes (Coule and Patmore 2013). This literature shows policy reform as being affected by the ability of various actors (e.g., street-level bureaucrats, managers) to work to adapt policy within the local context as it has been passed down from central command (Breit et al. 2016; Cloutier et al. 2016; Farooqi and Forbes 2020; Knox and Arshed 2024). Various types of work, such as structural work that establishes new roles and systems, conceptual work that creates new beliefs, operational work that implements new behaviors, and relational work that builds linkages, trust, and collaborations, have been found to be mechanisms for shaping reform (Cloutier et al. 2016).

Less attention has been placed on "maintenance" work that ensures coherence by transmitting norms, facilitating easy adoption of practices, and preventing institutional drift (Dacin et al. 2010; Siebert et al. 2017). Institutions need maintenance to remain relevant and effective as without it they would simply decay over time (Siebert et al. 2017). This is especially important during periods of institutional disruption which challenge existing taken-for-granted beliefs in which actors base their legitimacy judgments. Resultingly institutional maintenance involves proactive efforts to uphold legitimacy and cultivate authentic behaviors, rituals, and narratives through ritualized activities, policy implementation, and culturally embedded norms (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Boutinot and Delacour 2022; Colombero and Boxenbaum 2019). Despite its importance, however, it is the least understood of the three types of institutional work.

Seminal efforts to codify institutional maintenance identified enabling, policing, and deterring work as means to ensure adherence to rules and valorising, demonizing, mythologizing, embedding, and routinizing as means to reproduce rules and existing norms (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). More recent research on institutional maintenance during disruptions focuses on reactive efforts by organizations or fields facing coercive reforms or exogenous shocks (Fredriksson 2014; Micelotta and Washington 2013; Pemer and Skjølsvik 2018). It reveals how repair work can rebuild legitimacy and mitigate crises (Heaphy 2013; Lok and De Rond 2013). Wright et al. (2021), for example, focus on the individual work doctors and nurses do as "custodians" to maintain an emergency department as a space of inclusion that was disrupted due to an outbreak in Ebola. Here, they strategically managed their resources and perceived threats of harm to maintain balance between social inclusion and local safety – thus retaining their legitimacy.

This literature reveals that during disruptions, such as COVID-19, organizations engage in reparative work to mend institutional breaches. This purposeful, temporal work stretches institutional fabric to prevent significant tears and contrasts with more coercive efforts (such as deterrence or policing) that enforce rules and reinforce norms often embedded in daily practices (Xiao and Klarin 2021; Heaphy 2013; Lok and De Rond 2013; Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). However, there is a gap regarding how intermediaries within governance networks and can actively maintain their legitimacy within the public sector institutions they operate in. Considering governance networks operate within "complex" institutional structures (Klijn and Koppenjan 2016), which are exacerbated during times of disruption, we aim to shed light on the work done to shape legitimacy and maintain normative cultural and regulative frameworks.

3 | Methods

This study employed an inductive qualitative case study approach (Gioia et al. 2013) to explore how intermediaries actively maintain the legitimacy of governance networks during institutional disruption. Our study focused on a network of government agencies, local authorities, social enterprises, and third sector intermediary organizations who cluster around government policy and funding to support the third sector in Scotland. Several of the intermediaries played a key role in the implementation of the Scottish Government Action Plan 2020–2021 by delivering emergency funds to social enterprises, volunteer groups, neighborhood associations, and charities during the pandemic. This network has been historically highlighted as working effectively

together to provide a robust support environment to support Scotland's third sector (Mazzei and Roy 2017; Roy et al. 2015). Post-COVID-19 audits praised the sector's collaborative success, but suggested potential for future enhancements (Scottish Government 2022).

3.1 | Research Context

Our research was conducted in the context of Scotland's pursuit of collaborative and localized reform following the Christie Commission in 2011, which criticized public service delivery as largely "unresponsive to the needs of individuals and communities" (Christie Commission 2011, viii). Embracing the Commission's directive, many institutions have moved towards a whole system approach, where public, third, and private sector partners collaborate to drive efficiency (Cairney et al. 2016). At the heart of this reform is a consortium of third sector partners formed in 2011, delivering Scottish Government-funded support programs to social enterprises. This consortium, along with other organizations, works across Scotland's 32 Local Authorities to ensure comprehensive business support reaches all social enterprises.

In response to COVID-19, the Scottish Government launched significant support initiatives in 2020–2021, including the £25 m Community & Third Sector Recovery Programme and a £14 m fund aiding third sector and community organizations in continuing operations during the pandemic. Additionally, a £350 m emergency communities fund and a £30 million Growth Fund were established to support charities and social enterprises. The social enterprise consortium, and particularly several intermediaries, took a central role in distributing these funds. Furthermore, the network of these organizations was crucial in upholding the social enterprise sector during the pandemic, navigating disruptions that threatened both individual organizations and collective practices. Acute disruptions forced organizations to adapt operations to meet pandemic regulations, while the network faced challenges managing the sudden influx of resources. Examining how intermediaries navigated legitimacy concerns during this period sheds light on the institutional dynamics within Scotland's distinctive collaborative third sector landscape, highlighting the resilience and adaptability required to sustain vital community services.

3.2 | Data Collection

We employed **purposive sampling** to ensure the inclusion of key organizations actively engaged in supporting Scotland's social enterprise sector during the COVID-19 crisis. This approach allowed us to target participants with direct experience and engagement in the crisis response, ensuring rich and relevant insights (Patton 1990). We started by identifying initial participants through professional networks and organizational websites. Then, we expanded our reach using snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981) where interviewees recommended others within their networks. This was especially useful during the pandemic, helping us find key players who might have been overlooked or were hard to reach due to limited in-person interactions. The pandemic's disruption allowed us to engage with a wider range of participants remotely, collecting data from various regions across Scotland.

Our sample included a variety of intermediary organizations, each playing distinct yet complementary roles in Scotland's social enterprise support network (Table 2). This diversity enriched our data by allowing us to explore multiple perspectives within the governance network. To protect their identities, we will be using pseudonyms (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Patton 1990). We refer to organizations in general terms throughout the analysis. National Advocacy Bodies (SS) advocated for the sector and connected organizations to opportunities, while Social Finance Providers (SIS) offered financial support through loans and investments to sustain enterprises. Local Support Hubs (TSI) acted as anchors for charities, social enterprises, and volunteer-led groups, ensuring their representation in regional planning. Business Development Networks (BGW) provided business support, funding guidance, and practical tools, whereas Collaborative Networks (SN) focused on peer support and capacity-building to strengthen local resilience. Entrepreneurial Support Accelerators (EL) mentored early-stage enterprises, guiding them through scaling and crisis navigation. Additionally, Local Authority Representatives managed pandemic recovery efforts, and social enterprises provided frontline insights into the effectiveness of these intermediary supports.

Overall, we conducted 29 semi-structured interviews via Zoom and Teams, each lasting 40 to 60 min, each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. These online methods were chosen due to pandemic restrictions and provided an accessible platform for participation. Each interview offered deeper insights into participants' roles and experiences, particularly in how they responded to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis. We designed the interview questions to align directly with our research question. To ensure they were grounded in the literature, we drew on key concepts around governance networks, legitimacy, and institutional work, particularly ideas like structural, relational, and signaling work (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Provan and Kenis 2008; Klijn and Koppenjan 2016). The questions for intermediaries explored how they adapted processes, maintained trust with funders and stakeholders, and balanced their own needs with the wider network to maintain legitimacy. For social enterprises, we focused on their experiences with accessing funding, the effectiveness of the support they received, and how they had to adapt their operations to meet new demands during the pandemic. We adapted these questions to each participant group to ensure both depth and relevance, capturing diverse perspectives on legitimacy maintenance during the COVID-19 crisis.

3.3 | Data Analysis

This study employed an iterative interpretive analysis following Gioia's methodology (Gioia et al. 2013). Initial open coding identified first-order concepts from interview transcripts, which were refined through constant comparison into second-order themes. Further abstraction produced aggregate theoretical dimensions forming the data structure (Table 3) (Gioia et al. 2013). Two authors independently coded transcripts, regularly reconciling

TABLE 2 | Sample characteristics.

Organization type	Organizations role	Number of interviews	Interviewee codes
Local Support Hubs (TSI)	Support charities, social enterprises, and community groups with advice, representation, and local planning partnerships.	5 interviews: Stirling (1), Glasgow (2), Dundee (2)	Stirling: TSI-S1 Glasgow: TSI-G1, TSI-G2 Dundee: TSI-D1, TSI-D2
National Advocacy Body (SS)	Advocates for Scotland's social enterprise sector, offering networking, capacity-building, and policy support.	1 interview: with National level bodies	National Level: SS-1
Social Finance Provider (SIS)	Connects capital with communities, supporting social enterprises through funding access, leadership programs, and capacity building.	1 interview: National level	National Level: SIS-1
Business Development Network (BGW)	Provides business support, workshops, funding guidance, and networking, including programs for women entrepreneurs.	4 interviews: Glasgow (2), Dundee (2)	Glasgow: BGW-G1, BGW-G2 Dundee: BGW-D1, BGW-D2
Collaborative Networks (SN)	Strengthens the third sector through peer support, training, networking, and advocacy.	3 interviews: Glasgow (2), Dundee (1)	Glasgow: SN-G1, SN-G2 Dundee: SN-D
Entrepreneurial Support Accelerators (EL)	Offers mentorship, resources, and investor connections to help social enterprises grow and innovate.	3 interviews: Aberdeen (1), Dundee (2)	Aberdeen: EL-A Dundee: EL-D1, EL-D2
Local Authority Representatives	Oversee third-sector recovery and community support at the local government level.	3 interviews: Stirling (1), Dundee (2)	Stirling: LA-S Dundee: LA-D1, LA-D2
Social Enterprises (SE)	Deliver social and environmental services across various regions.	9 interviews across multiple regions	SE-1 to SE-9

discrepancies, with one acting as a devil's advocate to challenge interpretations. NVivo software facilitated systematic data management. Line-by-line coding of 29 transcripts generated 110 NVivo codes, condensed into 35 first-order concepts and nine second-order themes, such as "future positioning" and "operational challenges" (example evidence in Appendix Table 1).

This process culminating in four theoretical dimensions: perceived threats to legitimacy, relational work, internal structuring, and external signaling. In a final step, we mapped our emerging categories against existing concepts of institutional work from Lawrence and Suddaby (2006). At this stage, we also revisited each intermediary in our sample to identify specific examples of institutional work and how this helped to maintain legitimacy (Appendix Table 2). This rigorous, multi-step process ensured an inductive model grounded in

data yet informed by theory (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Gioia et al. 2013).

4 | Findings

The findings reveal how the COVID-19 crisis caused disruption within Scotland's social enterprise network. The exogenous shock of the pandemic triggered perceived threats to the legitimacy of intermediary organizations at both individual and collective levels. In response, intermediaries engaged in different forms of institutional work aimed at maintaining legitimacy amidst the crisis. At the individual organizational level, threats emerged related to operational capacity, resources, and the ability to adapt to new processes, which challenge the credibility of the organization to deliver public

TABLE 3 | Data structure.

1st order codes	2nd order constructs	Institutional work types[a]	Aggregate dimensions
• Funding streams • Technology and skills development • Hiring people/volunteers • Ethics, privacy, and well-being	Operational challenges	—	Perceived threats to legitimacy
• Liminal placement between reference groups • Issues with labelling and diluting	Future institutional positioning	—	
• Capacity of organizations to consult • Exclusion versus inclusion • Scarcity of resources • Competing organizational values	Representation & power politics	—	
• Resisting branching out • Reinforcing key purposes • Reconciling internal and external tension • Mission drift—adopting new language	Mission focus	Policing (reinforcing mission alignment and regulatory compliance)	Internal structuring
• Reconstructing rules and boundaries • Creating new work boundaries • Innovating to address changing needs	Material organization	Enabling work (establishing governance structures to maintain stability)	
• Promoting values and characteristics • Promoting new services to help users • Adaption of communication	Promotion	Valorising (promoting legitimacy through strategic messaging and advocacy)	External signaling
• Forging associations with other organizations • Earning a seat at the table • Educating external stakeholders	Alignment	Embedding (aligning with key governance actors to reinforce institutional standing)	
• Genuine relationships and shared understanding • History of past relationships • Forging new relationships	Relation building	Embedding (strengthening governance norms through trust-building and shared institutional values)	Relational work
• Communication and coordination • Overlapping jurisdiction • Role confusions • Duplication	Relation breaking	Deterring (defining governance boundaries to prevent fragmentation and maintain coherence)	

[a]Lawrence and Suddaby (2006).

services. At the network level, the issues of power imbalances and the future positioning of the field emerged to challenge collective legitimacy.

Our analysis highlighted three critical forms of institutional maintenance work by intermediaries in response to these legitimacy threats: internal structuring, external signaling, and relational work. Internal structuring realigned organizational elements such as missions and priorities, while external signaling promoted the network's value to maintain field-level legitimacy. Relational work underpinned these efforts, facilitating internal cohesion and external legitimacy, but relationships

were adjusted or severed when partners prioritized personal over collective interests.

4.1 | Perceived Threats to Legitimacy

The organizations within the network faced several challenges that threatened their individual agency to operate, which subsequently threatened their credibility to deliver public services. Several field-level concerns were also evident, including concerns over the future positioning of the social enterprise sector and the power dynamics between network members, which threatened the collective legitimacy of the collaborative governance network.

4.2 | Operational Challenges

The intermediary organizations, like all organizations within the network, faced several challenges when the Scottish Government mandated lockdown, stopping face-to-face interaction, which disrupted how public services could be delivered. Challenges included adopting new technology to move services online, concerns over future funding sources, how to manage employees with flexible and online working, and developing new skill requirements. These changes threatened their way of delivering services and required them to adapt how they worked. This created uncertainty on how to manage organizations both internally and externally:

> Other challenges for the pandemic are very operational challenges. When is the right time to bring staff back? We've been working at home. When is the right time to be bringing them back? What's that balance between the gain in terms of where there is a productivity gain or not, or whether it's a mental health gain, versus the risks to that approach and the associated costs that we need to put in place to bring people back safely (TSI-G1).

Our participants expressed that "...it was a very confused landscape, not just for the clients and the businesses out there, but for the support agencies as well" and operational challenges posed a threat to their ability to individually deliver services to clients:

> I say they just wanted somebody on the end of the phone to say, here is the link that you go to. This is the grant that you apply for. You're allowed to stay open till 10:00 pm at night. You're allowed to do this, and you know somebody setting it out in layman's terms for them, because there was just too much information coming at them from various sources and it was difficult for them to understand and absorb... (BGW-G2).

Taken together, operational challenges represented a tense situation for intermediaries, who faced disruption to their specific ways of working. Resultingly, they needed to balance the needs of their clients, with their internal pressures.

4.3 | Future Institutional Positioning

There was a concern about the precarious situation of intermediary organizations regarding the uncertain future of the third sector. These organizations sat at the intersection of different institutions and felt accountable to different stakeholders:

> There's an inherent challenge in being an intermediary body and that uncomfortable place between the third sector and statutory partners. And while we are firmly ourselves, a third sector organisation, we have to be in that middle ground and negotiating and brokering come from both sides and sometimes you know it means having difficult discussions with their membership as well (TS1-S1).

While an abundance of funds was available to third-sector entities during the pandemic, and the network of third sector partners was crucial in delivering the Government's response funding and support, there was a collective acknowledgement among informants that this would not be the case going forward, thus challenges the long-term credibility of the sector as a whole:

> We are actually in a better financial position now than we were pre-COVID. But we're very aware that funding... You build up a staff team. You build up expertise and you increase your ambition. When that's the case, we're very cautious about what the future financial settlement for the third sector will look like (TSI-G2).

4.4 | Representation and Power Politics

Among our informants, there was also concern about whether their collective voice was being heard. Interviews with the intermediary organizations highlighted that Local Authorities at times act as "gatekeepers." Rather than seeking active representation of intermediary organizations, they would "keep them at arm's length." This highlighted the exclusion or inclusion of certain stakeholders in policy processes at the practice level, reflecting power struggles and capacity issues related to sector representation:

> If you're running a social enterprise and you're also the chair of the local network. You don't have time to go to six meetings a week about various things, so there's a real issue around capacity as well, so the capacity of a network, the capacity of social enterprises to work in partnership then becomes a barrier as well because Local Authorities want it on their terms. Usually, you know they want an answer quick (SS-1).

We observed some intermediaries placing their self-interest above the needs of the collective. There was a power issue within the network which led to certain stakeholders being excluded

from "sitting at the table" which generated issues about whose voice was being heard:

> We have some players in the sector who like to be at the top table sitting at government and they want to be the most important people, but they're not necessarily listening to the community of social enterprises... so that can be very difficult as well because for the government they just want one person to speak to. They don't want to have to speak to 50 people... when we see we don't have an answer, we will go away, and we will [consult]. We will come back with an answer as opposed to somebody who just says this is good for my organisation, I think this is the direction (SS-1).

There was a sense that this was exacerbated during the fast-paced decision-making environment of emergency response funds and support. This individual behavior threatened the collaborative nature of decision-making. Linked to these power dynamics was the availability of resources. With funding sources scarce within the network of organizations, this could often prompt competition between intermediaries which wasn't necessarily good for the collective. There was an acknowledgement among stakeholders that, although the pandemic had brought them all together, previous competitive dynamics could be reverted. Each intermediary attributed the Scottish Government as being able to either facilitate or restrict this, thus acted as a threat to the collective legitimacy of the network going forward:

> I think the government has to recognise that it was possible to pull organisations together for the common good. And I think what we'll find is there needs to be a restructuring of how these organisations are set up. What I see now is that all of these different organisations will receive some form of Scottish Government funding. They will also receive some form of trust funding or some form of grant funding or some other type of funding. So, they as a landscape are competing for money... (SE-1).

4.5 | Internal Structuring

Intermediaries engaged in "internal structuring" to uphold the legitimacy of the governance network and ensure the delivery of credible public services. This process aligns with "policing," which reinforces institutional norms and regulatory compliance, and "enabling work," which focuses on developing governance structures to maintain institutional resilience (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006).

4.5.1 | Mission Focus

This type of work focused on reaffirming normative values and keeping a focus on core social objectives while responding to various challenges the pandemic imposed. For many intermediaries, they would need to resist branching out into different service deliveries. This would often cause tension, as delivering new services could potentially lead to new funding avenues and relieve some of the operational challenges they faced. However, several acknowledged the importance of staying focused on the core social objective to retain legitimacy, both internal and external, particularly during a crisis:

> I think there is tension for us, we could trade in many more areas than we choose to, and we do not because we try to not compete with the sector. We are in a privileged power position, as we have these networks we could create (TSI-S).

> If we didn't have a strong core, strong values and mission, we wouldn't have survived because we wouldn't have known what directions to take (SS-1).

Drifting from this mission, therefore, would ultimately devalue the collective service provision, inviting competition, duplication, diluting boundaries and subsequently represented a threat to their credibility as a collective:

> I suppose it's all down to planning. It's about having a clear vision and around about where you want to go, and what the big thing is... We spent a long time looking at our vision, looking at our mission, looking at our values, understanding why we exist, and understanding that we position ourselves in a way that adds value and doesn't duplicate and enhances the ecosystem (SE-2).

4.5.2 | Material Work

Material work focused on reorganizing material attributes and formal rules of collaboration. This involved reconstructing and re-negotiating working relationships to maintain quality service delivery. This included formal arrangements, such as a memorandum of understanding, which acted to cement legitimate working patterns:

> We're now in a position where we're developing a memorandum of understanding with the TSI and we're working more closely with them. It's almost like you have a, you know, when you have the same enemies, we unite. Now that the government is... saying we want this, and so it's our role to work together so that we can make sure that actually what is delivered is right for the sector (SN-S1).

The need to interpret and make sense of the government guidelines and funding support for the client organizations led intermediary organizations towards internal collaborations. These new collaborations reaffirmed unwritten roles based on a shared understanding of a core value to "support clients":

> My job is about knowing what support is available around the ecosystem for businesses to access. Yes, a lot of those services changed... it was all very confusing for us as well... also internally, you know, in a normal year the advisors would have their client base that they would work with, uh, but during lock down there was a lot of discussion between the advisors about certain clients and what support was available ... all information about new services, new funds was coming out at such a high pace, it was difficult to aim for one advisor to stay on top of it all. So, we kind of shared the burden of brightness as a client I've got. Is there anything that I'm missing that there could be suitable to support this client and so we were all kind of chipping in together to support clients (BGW-G2).

Flexibility and adaptation were important to maintain services, but bureaucratic procedures to ensure accountability also had to be followed. Participants emphasizes this attitude, stating:

> I am all for removing unnecessary bureaucracy, but some of it is there to keep people safe... none of the bureaucracy in normal times matters (TSI-G1)

> They (community) were needing their prescriptions picked up... as an agency. sending people that we don't know out into that environment, we had to create a really good balance between the informal response and what would be the formal response through constituted groups and registered charities (TSI-S1)

It is evident in our data that organizations are more likely to resort to their core values as a prelude to structural work.

4.5.3 | External Signaling

Intermediaries engaged in "external signaling" to reinforce the legitimacy of the governance network by promoting the value of the social enterprise sector and ensuring alignment with broader institutional expectations. This reflects efforts to safeguard legitimacy through strategic messaging, advocacy, and network positioning, aligning with valorising where institutional actors symbolically reinforce their contributions to sustain legitimacy (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006).

4.5.3.1 | Promotion. This type of work focused on highlighting the value of the sector to external stakeholders and promoting organizations as relevant players during crises. It involved outwardly expressing services, abilities, and values and would involve various communication channels. To disseminate information and help member organizations make sense of the support available, intermediary organizations set up support groups, social media pages, and communicated key policies around grant funding to their users:

> We needed to get information out to them around. Here are the grants you can go for. Here are the universal links or the Universal Credit links. Here's the information that's coming off. We set up our coverage, Facebook group, and everything so that you could just share your fears... What's going on inside your head or whatever and that helped a lot (SN-G2).

This helped them overcome issues around the accessibility of information and enabled intermediary organizations to gain more visibility, helping them resolve issues of external legitimacy with service users. Intermediary organizations would not just look towards service users but would actively try to engage with other external stakeholders to highlight the value of the third sector as key partners in public service provision. Informants would stress the value they could provide in delivering public services, providing innovation and creative solutions, thus becoming more legitimate partners to funders and governments:

> The government wants us to work more with the third sector... And you know, doing fantastic work in this sector, and I think it's kind of given as a wee bit extra legitimacy, shall we say and that they will actually take us and maybe take us seriously now as a partner around the table and that we can provide solutions and new ways of thinking (SN-G1).

4.5.3.2 | Alignment. When faced with collective threats, organizations were seen to be aligning with important agendas that emerged and positioned themselves within important conversations to deal with power politics. One of the ways that organizations aligned themselves was to forge comparisons with other stakeholders to highlight their value and respond to threats to their collective agency. One frequent comparison was made against larger, incumbent public sector organizations and the benefits of the flexibility third sector organizations had:

> These were shocked by the speed of the response and the flexibility of the social enterprise sector to adapt and be there immediately to provide emergency support... Local authorities tend to be big, unwieldy bodies. Do you know where one department doesn't talk to the next?... whereas you know social enterprises have proved themselves to be agile, and flexible (SN-G1).

Not only did this signal normative values and characteristics of the social enterprise network, but also distinguished between in-members, out-members, and those that had drifted from the core values of the social enterprise sector. A key role that intermediaries had to play was educating and challenging policy rhetoric. This stemmed from a lack of understanding from important external actors which threatened their collective agency:

When you're working with the public sector there's a real lack of understanding of what a social enterprise is. There is a lack of understanding around how to work with communities as well. We still see this top-down approach happening and you know policy coming from the government is all about community empowerment. It's all about shifting some of that power across. But some, and it usually comes into individuals, cannot let go of power (SS-1).

Through their work they could not only align with the key agendas and work on becoming legitimate public service partners but by being invited around the table they were able to emphasize their value, find their voice, and influence agenda:

It was a fight for the third sector to be recognised as a legitimate partner around that table... I think we were able to show them what true partnership working looks like because traditionally they've not had to do it. You know, I think that's kind of really helped in terms of our legitimacy and sort of when you couple that with the changing attitudes of consumers (SN-G1).

4.5.3.3 | Relational Work. Intermediaries also engaged in "relational work" focusing on stakeholder relationships, conflict mediation, and legitimacy negotiation. This reflects a combination of embedding (where governance norms and shared values are reinforced) and deterring (where distinctions between stakeholders are actively managed) (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006).

4.5.3.3.1 | Relation Building. According to our informants, crisis brought all these organizations, both public sector and intermediary organizations, together. Before the crisis, there was a lack of inter- and intra-organization communication and coordination among various stakeholders. However, during crises, their dependency on each other to deal with the local contingencies led to the development of new collaborations, particularly at the local level:

It was about this organisation truly supporting locally... They understood that they could not make decisions in a local context because they weren't based there... I think the funding made them work together collaboratively. Make decisions on funding, builds things that I hadn't necessarily seen in the sector prior (SE-1).

Our staff members joined multi agency teams who were staffing COVID response lines for members of our community... We were there at frontline the coordinating community groups to provide that response (TSI-G2).

... so, people were completely changing as to what the needs of the community was, and so we saw collaboration there, we saw that in conversation

and relationships... If you're going to collaborate, you have to have some form of relationship. We've got to develop that trust. So, think through some of this stuff, new relationships were formed with the potential for new collaborations going forward. So yes, maybe on a local level, but maybe not on a higher level (SS-1).

Building on the examples earlier, our data shows that relational work underpinned intermediaries institutional work. This notion that all service providers were "in it together" stemmed from genuine strong relationships, and trust, that had been forged before the pandemic. The immediate "response" informants referred to drew on these historical connections that existed across the social enterprise sector. Through maintaining connections, intermediary organizations were able to send external signals to their constituents promoting themselves as key legitimate players during the time of crises. They were also able to maintain strong working relations to underpin the internal structures, communicate, and reinforce normative values of the governance network.

I think those connections stood well in that initial phase. People knew each other... There was a response to maintain contact and connectedness through and across that ecosystem (SIS-1).

Cooperation has increased during COVID-19. ... There was collaboration and contacts and conversations between players. I think what happened in COVID-19 was that on a practical level, to design funds and get them out the door the practical joint working became more intensive and closer and as a result, SOF teams probably know each other slightly more than they used to and have been working together more closely than they would have been (SIS-1).

Intermediary organizations attributed their success to address external and internal threats to their relational work:

So, I believe we were successful, but it was largely to do with the emphasis that we placed on relationships and building very strong relationships for the five years prior (S1S-1).

I think the reason that we were successful was that we were trusted. And we had put that work in beforehand (TSI-G1).

4.5.3.3.2 | Relation Breaking. Different organizations were competing for the same resources and had overlapping jurisdictions, resulting in tension between network members:

So, it's managing expectations... One of the challenges for public sector funders is just to ensure that you know everyone is very clear that they're not chasing

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after the same pot of money because that's when competition probably does arise (EL-D1).

At times, breaking relationships with certain members who pursued an individual agenda helped to avoid disruption. For those that did pursue an individual agenda through increasing their power and competing with their collaborative partners, they may have increased their position temporarily, but in the long run the wider belief was that this could ultimately jeopardize their legitimacy. Whereas some organizations that looked to reposition their core offerings members pursuing a collective agenda carefully re-examined their core purpose to avoid certain conflicting situations:

> I think there is the tension for us... we could trade in many more areas than we choose to, and we do not because we try to not compete with the sector, we are in a privileged power position is we have these networks we could create. And that would be fundamentally wrong and the abuse of our power. And because we are there to support others... We won't go into other areas that could jeopardize it and I think there's something about that spirit of competition that we want to avoid (TS1-G2).

For many informants the notion that the "landscape was too cluttered" and that there was a "duplications of resources" had a tremendous impact, resulting in them calling for better collaborations:

> Even within the Scottish Government, there's no clarity among the different departments of the Scottish Government there. There are often policy agendas or for example, in this case, there were funds brought out to support the sectors that were almost identical but run through two completely different departments. They're completely different, and there are other agents... I think there needs to be greater collaboration between the third sector infrastructure bodies and the national level on a local level (TSI-S1).

Forging relationships enabled collaborative partners to manage operational challenges and allowed the collective to break away from those pursuing an individual agenda. Building shared understanding facilitated appropriate external signaling and construct boundaries for acceptable behavior during the crisis. Overall, relational work underpinned maintaining both internal and external legitimacy by enabling a balance between individual and collective agency.

5 | Discussion

Our purpose in this paper was to explore how organizations within collaborative governance arrangements maintain their legitimacy during crises where there is an identified gap in the literature (Brandsen and Johnston 2018; Johnston et al. 2011; Provan and Kenis 2008; Triantafillou and Hansen 2022). Through our inductive analysis of an in-depth case of the social enterprise network in Scotland, this paper contributes to the growing literature on institutional maintenance by investigating the role of intermediary organizations in collaborative governance during disruption.

5.1 | Towards a Model of Collaborative Governance Legitimacy Maintenance During Crisis

Figure 1 illustrates our proposed model, which, based on our key findings, shows how institutional work maintains legitimacy in governance networks during disruptions, advancing beyond static conceptualizations of institutional maintenance (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). Disruptions in collaborative governance create dual legitimacy threats, reflecting the complexity of networked arrangements (Greenwood et al. 2011). When disruptions occur, networks face two types of legitimacy threats, as consistently identified by our participants. First, collective threats involve challenges related to future institutional positioning and representation, which network members referred to as "power dynamics" and "sectoral tensions" (reflecting boundary contestation discussed by Zietsma and Lawrence 2010). Individually, organizations encounter operational challenges, highlighting the tension between institutional preservation and organizational agency (Lawrence et al. 2013).

The model shows that these threats activate distinct but interconnected maintenance mechanisms. Through relation building, networks engage in collaborative institutional work aligning networks around a shared mission, structure, and goals (Cloutier et al. 2016; Hampel et al. 2017). Conversely, our findings show when faced with individual legitimacy threats, organizations may employ "relation breaking" as a strategic response, prioritizing survival through mission drift or strategic repositioning (Smets and Jarzabkowski 2013), potentially diverging from network objectives.

While relation-building fosters collaboration and alignment, relation-breaking serves as coercive work, preventing self-interest, power struggles, and mission drift from compromising network integrity. As a corrective mechanism, it ensures that organizational actions remain aligned with the collective agenda. Intermediaries manage competitive tensions by employing formal agreements, enforcement mechanisms, and strategic disengagement to realign or exclude actors who threaten collective legitimacy, reinforcing institutional stability. This study challenges the view of relational work as purely inclusive, demonstrating that boundary setting and selective exclusion are essential for governance networks. By setting boundaries, organizations prevent mission drift, reinforcing their internal legitimacy while signaling alignment with public expectations to maintain external legitimacy. The findings introduce coercive work as an integration mechanism, extending institutional repair theory (Micelotta and Washington 2013) and contributing to boundary work literature (Wright et al. 2021). Hence, relation-breaking is not just
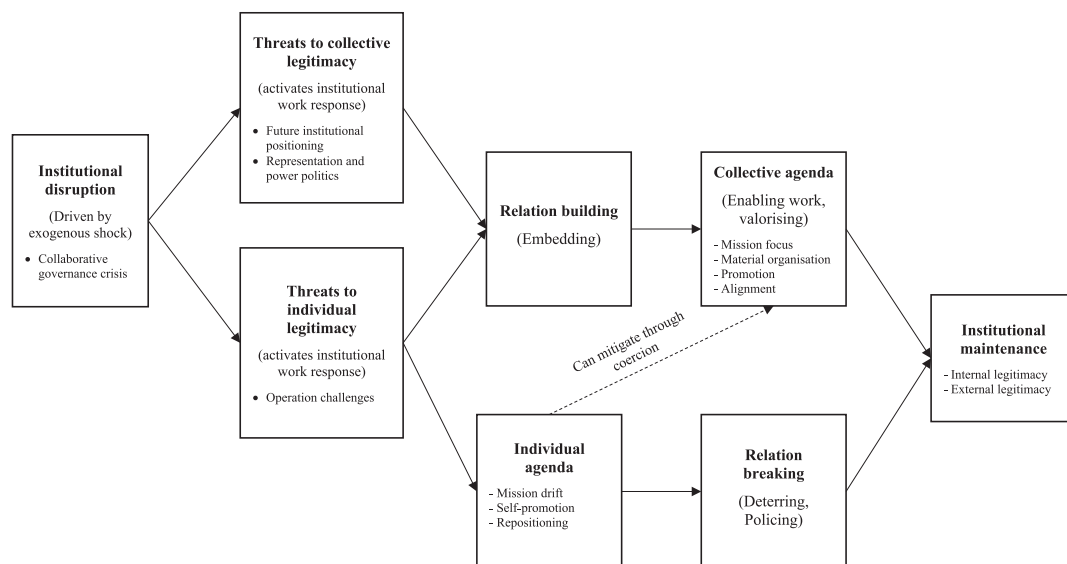
FIGURE 1 | A process of legitimacy maintenance in governance networks.

reactive but a strategic tool for maintaining institutional coherence and long-term network stability.

5.2 | Research Contributions

This study advances three primary contributions to the literature on collaborative governance and institutional maintenance. First, our findings add depth to the understanding of legitimacy maintenance in collaborative governance (Christensen and Lægreid 2020; Mosley and Wong 2021; Provan and Kenis 2008) by highlighting the dual role of intermediaries in maintaining field-level legitimacy. While relational work in governance is typically associated with trust-building and inclusivity, this study expands this understanding by demonstrating how boundary-setting through selective disengagement equally contributes to legitimacy maintenance. Intermediaries in collaborative governance are not merely facilitators; they also function as gatekeepers, actively managing both inclusion and exclusion to uphold network integrity.

In this context, relational work becomes the foundational mechanism for institutional maintenance, yet it goes beyond trust-building to include coercive elements, formalized linkages, and agreements that reinforce collective norms, especially during disruptions (Cloutier et al. 2016; Smets and Jarzabkowski 2013; Wright et al. 2021). Importantly, this study argues that relational work also involves knowing when to disengage from partners who deviate from normative values, thus taking on a reparative role by restoring alignment through selective exclusion. This finding extends the understanding of collaborative governance as a balance of inclusive and exclusive practices essential to sustaining coherence and credibility, highlighting that institutional work within these networks is primarily relational rather than structural. By strategically managing membership boundaries, intermediaries reinforce shared norms and prevent mission drift, underscoring the essential role of relational work in institutional maintenance.

Second, our study advances the concept of collective legitimacy in governance networks, demonstrating its interdependent nature and the need for active maintenance across network levels (Lawrence et al. 2013). Unlike traditional perspectives cantered on organizational legitimacy, our findings highlight the role of intermediaries in balancing shared values with diverse institutional objectives. In crises, collective legitimacy becomes essential for network resilience, requiring intermediaries to align internal structures while maintaining external credibility through signaling, restructuring, and boundary management. This study reinforces legitimacy maintenance as a continuous, adaptive process, rather than a static outcome. Nonetheless, findings highlight the need for ongoing legitimacy maintenance within governance networks (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006).

Furthermore, we contribute to relational work by illustrating how legitimacy is actively shaped through collaborative engagement, boundary-setting, and selective exclusion. Our model challenges the notion of relational work as solely inclusive, demonstrating that strategic disengagement plays a critical role in preventing mission drift and reinforcing institutional coherence. This study, therefore, enriches governance research by positioning legitimacy maintenance as an interdependent and adaptive process, where governance networks navigate disruptions through a deliberate interplay of inclusion and exclusion (Lok and De Rond 2013; Lawrence and Suddaby 2006).

Third, we identify coercive work as a critical yet under-theorized mechanism in institutional maintenance. This challenges the prevailing assumption regarding purely voluntary coordination in governance networks (Provan and Kenis 2008) by illustrating how selective exclusion and formal enforcement mechanisms actively shape legitimacy maintenance. Our findings highlight that effective institutional maintenance necessitates both enabling and constraining practices (Smets and Jarzabkowski 2013). Addressing calls for deeper insights into institutional work in crisis contexts (Dacin et al. 2010; Siebert et al. 2017; Wright et al. 2021), we demonstrate how various

forms of maintenance work interact dynamically during crises, requiring the sophisticated integration of multiple institutional work practices. This advances conceptualizations of institutional maintenance, offering a more nuanced understanding of its adaptability in crisis conditions.

6 | Conclusion

Despite the importance of collaborative governance during COVID-19, the mechanisms for maintaining legitimacy in these networks are underexplored (Christensen and Lægreid 2020). This study examines how intermediaries in Scotland's social enterprise sector navigate agency and legitimacy issues, revealing that relational work is crucial for ensuring both internal and external legitimacy.

As governance networks face increasing political, social, and economic pressures, our findings highlight persistent challenges in collaborative governance, particularly around power dynamics, equity, and relationship management. Maintaining network legitimacy requires active boundary management, clear protocols, and continuous monitoring (Dacin et al. 2010; Micelotta and Washington 2013; Siebert et al. 2017). Beyond trust and collaboration, third-sector intermediaries must develop capabilities for network coordination, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive governance, particularly in times of disruption.

Future research should examine how third-sector governance networks build resilience capabilities, how they navigate institutional disruptions, and how different governance contexts shape legitimacy maintenance strategies. Comparative studies could further explore how institutional structures impact governance effectiveness.

Methodologically, while our focus on intermediary organizations provided valuable insights into network maintenance, it primarily captured their perspective rather than the full range of network actors (Fossestøl et al. 2015). Given Scotland's distinct governance model (Roy et al. 2015) and the COVID-19 context, the maintenance practices observed may not fully generalize to other settings. Future research should explore legitimacy maintenance across governance roles, including frontline service providers and policymakers, to deepen insights into network dynamics (Bjurstrøm 2021). Cross-sectoral and comparative research could also clarify how institutional environments shape governance practices and third-sector capabilities.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the Supporting Information of this article.

Endnotes

[1] We define a field as a "community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with on another than with actors outside the field" (Scott 1995, 56).

[2] We define an institution as "more or less taken-for-granted repetitive social behavior that is underpinned by normative systems and cognitive understanding that give meaning to a variety of social practices and sustain a particular type of social order" (Dacin et al. 2010, 1393).

[3] We define intermediary organizations as "nongovernmental actors who have professional knowledge and participate in public service delivery" (Haug 2024, 1071).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.