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Interagency Collaboration

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Introduction

Definition

As societies become increasingly complex owing to social, economic and technological progress, government’s capacity to tackle societal issues comes under pressure. The interconnected nature of societies poses new challenges for governments in the form of ‘wicked problems’. Issues such as global warming, financial crises, pandemics, poverty, and public safety, require the attention of multiple government agencies (Mullin and Daley 2009), as none of these problems fit within traditional policy fields. Collaborations between these different government agencies – ‘interagency collaboration’ – help to coordinate the efforts of the government, and provide a proper governance structure to tackle wicked issues. By closely and actively working together with other agencies, governments stimulate integrated policy design and service delivery, and enhance public sector innovation.

Interagency collaboration

Organizational collaboration is ‘a process in which autonomous actors interact through formal and informal negotiation, jointly creating rules and structures governing their relationships and ways to act or decide on the issues that brought them together; it is a process involving shared norms and mutually beneficial interactions’ (Thomson and Perry 2006, 23). Interagency collaboration is a specific type of organizational collaboration between government agencies that is directed towards crossagency issues. It can therefore be defined as ‘the formal and informal processes between networks of interdependent agencies through which problems that cut across jurisdictions are dealt with and integrated policies and public services are developed’ (Mu, de Jong and Koppenjan 2019, 582). Examples include collaborations between law enforcement agencies for criminal investigations, national disaster relief collaborations in the aftermath of floods or hurricanes, collaborations between environmental agencies, aimed at reducing pollution and promoting sustainable energy sources, and collaborations between health and social care agencies for the harmonization of human services.

A distinguishing characteristic of interagency collaboration is the notable intensity of the relationships between the collaborating partners (Mu, de Jong and Koppenjan 2019). Keast, Brown, and Mandell (2007) make a distinction between cooperation, coordination, and
collaboration. At the lowest level of intensity, cooperation refers to the exchange of information and expertise by actors that only interact with each other when necessary. Coordination corresponds to the processes by which actors align their goals and activities. In contrast to cooperation and coordination, collaboration refers to the close and intensive interaction between multiple actors, whose activities are closely integrated, risks, resources, capabilities, and responsibilities are shared, and goals and outcomes are achieved together. New organizational structures such as partnerships are often established to support the development of collaborative processes (Mu, de Jong and Koppenjan 2019).

Interagency collaboration is also characterized by the inherent tension between autonomy and interdependency (Rodriguez et al. 2007; Verhoest 2018). Although the actors each have the autonomy to make decisions for themselves, their decisions influence the actions of other actors in the collaboration, which, in turn, might influence their attitude towards these actors, and therefore limit the access to valuable capabilities.

Stimulating conditions of interagency collaboration

Because interagency collaboration can be challenging and does not always lead to desired or positive effects, scholars have investigated the stimulating conditions of interagency collaboration. A central concept in the search for these success factors, is that of the collaborative capacity of interagency collaborations. Hudson et al. (1999, 245) define collaborative capacity as ‘the level of activity or degree of change a collaborative relationship is able to sustain without any partner losing a sense of security in the relationship’. Collaborative capacity fosters joint decision-making and helps to bridge power discrepancies amongst the collaborating actors. A more detailed look at the concept reveals a lot of separate dimensions, which can operate both before and during the collaboration process. Combined with each other, they determine how well the individuals and organizations involved in the collaboration are able to sustainably collaborate with each other. We consider multiple conditions that relate to the collaborative capacity of an interagency collaboration.

The first group of conditions corresponds to the structural features of the collaboration, which should fit the context. As we mentioned, network structures have to be in place to prevent an unstable collaboration, but too rigid structures might also inhibit the flexibility that is inherent to collaborations. Provan and Kenis (2007) suggest three models of network structure, which each depict how the collaboration can be successfully governed, depending on the context. The first ‘mode of network governance’ is that of the ‘shared participantgoverned networks’, which
entails the equal involvement of all of the collaborating actors in governing and maintaining the collaboration. The second mode of network governance refers to the ‘lead organization-governed networks’, which are collaborations that are governed by a single actor or by multiple actors, functioning as central brokers in the collaboration, and having more decision-making power than the other actors in the collaboration. The third mode of network governance is called the ‘network-administrative organization’ (NAO), which refers to collaborations that have established an administrative entity with no direct stake in the process, which governs and controls the collaboration process. According to Provan and Kenis (2007), collaborations that are established between only a few participants, in a context of high interpersonal trust and goal consensus, and without a lot of complexities that need specialized network management skills, are more suited for shared-governance networks. Collaborations between a moderate number of actors, with not a lot of trust between the actors, moderately low goal consensus, and a moderate need for specialized network management skills, should consider a lead-organization network. Last but not least, the network-administrative organization (NAO) is best equipped to govern collaborations between a moderate or large number of actors, which moderately trust each other, have a moderately high goal consensus, and need a lot of specialized network management skills.

A second group refers to a vast set of interpersonal conditions. Kelman et al. (2012) shows how building trust, sharing power, visionary leadership, information sharing and synergies between the collaborating partners, are more important in interagency partnerships than hierarchical conditions such as monitoring and accessing resources and authority from government. Similarly, Ward et al. (2018) and Scott and Boyd (2020) show how interpersonal trust and goal commitment positively affect interagency collaboration, and Gerlak and Heikkila (2011) demonstrate the importance of information sharing, dialogue, and frequent face-to-face communication. This is in line with the broader collaborative governance literature, with trust building, open communication, and information sharing being considered to be crucial for successful partnerships (Crosby and Bryson 2005).

Hence, the way in which these collaborative processes are managed is also highly influential for interagency collaboration. The literature roughly makes a distinction between three levels of management. At the highest level, governments need to be capable of governing the increasing plurality and complexity of government systems, for which meta-governance is needed. Meta-governance can be defined as “a way of enhancing coordinated governance in a fragmented political system based on a high degree of autonomy for a plurality of self-
governing networks and institutions’ (Sørensen 2006, 100). Meta-governance is particularly useful as a governance instrument for multi-actor collaborations, and scholars have suggested multiple approaches to how meta-governance can be conducted in a network context. For instance, Sørensen and Torfing (2009) propose four different metagovernance strategies to govern networks: network design, network framing, network management, and network participation. The former two strategies are hands-off approaches, whereby government operates at a distance from the network, and the latter two are hands-on approaches, whereby government is closely involved in the network. At a lower level, activities of network actors and the network itself can also be managed. Klijn et al. (2010) propose four distinct network management strategies, each targeted at different aspects of the collaboration process. Exploring strategies are aimed at searching for goal congruency, actors’ perspectives, and information; connecting strategies are directed towards the connection of actors and resources; arranging strategies are used to create new ad hoc collaborative arenas; and process agreements function as rules and procedures that control aspects of the collaboration process (e.g. rules for entrance, conflict resolution, decision-making, etc.). At the lowest level of analysis, we can consider the leadership of individuals in the network. For instance, Ansell and Gash (2012, 8) distinguish three types of leadership roles: stewards, who establish and protect the integrity of the collaboration; mediators, who arbitrate and nurture relationships between actors; and catalysts, who identify value creating opportunities and mobilize stakeholders. All of these types of management practices (i.e. meta-governance, network management, and leadership) have also been empirically linked to successful interagency collaboration (e.g. Ward et al. 2018).

Other stimulating conditions of interagency collaboration are aimed at controlling the outcome of the collaboration processes, with minimal interference of the process itself. Contracts and agreements are good examples of this, and they have been shown to be an important attribute of less intensive types of interagency collaborations (Sowa 2008). Contracts structure the demands of the various partners in an enforceable way, thereby facilitating accountability and commitment amongst the partners. Contract conditions might for instance specify the outcome that needs to be achieved, in order to stimulate the partners to work closely together to reach this outcome. Other goal setting structures target the overall performance instead of the outcome, by means of performance evaluations. Mullin and Daley (2009) show for instance that the presence of performance evaluations that are related to collaborative efforts, is a strong incentive for cross-level interagency collaboration. Furthermore, institutional rules, roles, and
norms, can have a strong impact on the collaboration process, as they dictate behavioural patterns throughout the collaboration (Ward et al. 2018). It has therefore been suggested that organizational cultures of collaboration and teamwork (Mischen 2015), consensus building (Innes and Booher 2010), and learning (Gerlak and Heikkila 2011), are ideal breeding grounds on which interagency collaboration can grow. Moreover, exploiting the presence of different organizational cultures in the collaboration can lead to synergies, as partners obtain new perspectives, are triggered to be creative, and learn from each other’s practices (McGuire and Vangen 2016). However, a balance between cultural diversity and similarity should be maintained, as too much diversity might lead to distrust, tension, and conflict, and can affect other crucial stimuli of collaboration such as communication and shared understanding.

Effects of interagency collaboration

Interagency collaboration has been attributed a lot of advantages over more traditional forms of organizing. An important advantage of interagency collaboration is its potentially beneficial effect on the organizational performance of agencies (Dickinson and Sullivan 2014). Collaborations may increase operational efficiency in case operations of the organization are replaced by more efficient activities performed by the collaboration, thereby reducing overall information costs of the individual organizations and preventing similar operations from being executed in parallel to each other. In addition, collaboration enables resource and information sharing, synergy, flexibility, and implementation capacity, which may make the execution of organizational activities more efficient (Sørensen and Torfing 2017). Efficiency gains are, however, not the only potentially beneficial effect of interagency collaboration on organizational performance. Researchers have shown that interagency collaboration might increase the quality of processes and services of organizations. Interagency collaboration may stimulate cost savings, create new opportunities for the collaborating agencies, and expand their programs (Ward et al. 2018). In the public sector, such ‘collaborative advantages’ might not only improve the organizational performance of the collaborating agencies, but might also increase the public value that is created by government, as service delivery to the public is enhanced. Moreover, the fact that multiple agencies from different policy fields work together, might augment the overall impact on public value, as problems in multiple policy fields are addressed. Addressing these cross-cutting and urgent issues also increases the legitimacy of the collaboration activities. Furthermore, collaboration potentially enhances the democratic legitimacy and transparency of agencies, depending on the extent that decision-making
processes are shared amongst multiple collaborating actors and not centralized in one government agency (Sørensen and Torfing 2017).

Besides its various effects on organizational performance, interagency collaboration might also enhance the creation and implementation of innovative products, services and processes. Pursuing innovation involves sequences of idea generation and idea implementation, which translate creative ideas into novel solutions (Damanpour and Schneider 2008). In interagency collaborations, multiple experiences, perspectives and knowledge pools come together (Torfing 2019). This fosters creative ideation, as new associations are formed between distinct concepts, existing beliefs of the involved actors are challenged and transformed, and the diversity of perspectives inspires new thinking patterns amongst those involved. Furthermore, collaboration increases the likelihood that creative ideas are actually implemented into innovative solutions. However, there is also an inherent tension between collaboration and innovation, as collaboration thrives in homogeneous, consensus-oriented groups, while innovation is stimulated by variance and divergent thinking (Torfing 2019). The best innovation partnership might therefore not always be the most stable and sustainable collaboration.

The beneficial effects discussed above must be interpreted in light of several drawbacks of interagency collaboration. For instance, collaboration introduces a lot of noise into decision-making processes because of the various backgrounds of the collaborating actors. Klijn and Koppenjan (2015) propose three ‘complexities’ related to collaborative processes. First, substantive complexities arise from the different knowledge backgrounds of the actors. Actors have different perceptions and opinions about the problem and how it should be solved. Second, strategic complexities emerge due to the individual objectives of the collaborating actors. This introduces strategic games into the collaboration process. Third, institutional complexities arise because of the different institutional and cultural backgrounds of the collaborating actors. ‘Rules of appropriateness’ of the various actors permeate the collaboration process, and historical interactions between the actors or their organizations influence the interactions in the collaboration. Each of these complexities can potentially hinder and even harm the collaborative endeavour, as they may increase information shortages, make negotiations harder, or even incite distrust and conflict. The higher the actor diversity, the more likely that such negative effects will arise (McGuire and Vangen 2016).

The consensus-oriented nature of most collaborations can make the process slow, inefficient, and underperforming (Huxham 2003). Due to a lack of clear hierarchical structure, decision-making goes through an iterative process of consensus building, which requires a lot of time
and energy of the collaborating actors. The lack of structure creates a network of loosely coupled actors, which, while indeed flexible, is also quite fragile (Ansell and Gash 2007) as partners may withdraw from the collaboration at any time and may cause a premature termination of the whole collaboration. Furthermore, collaborations that lack proper structure, goal orientation and process management might easily end up as inefficient deliberation arenas, which have no real impact on decision-making. However, the opposite might also be detrimental for the collaborative endeavour, as installing a clear structure and management can lead to the formation of a new bureaucratic entity, which has all the features of the inflexible organization form, which the establishment of the collaboration was intended to circumvent (Provan and Kenis 2007). Upholding this delicate balance between under- and over-structuring and managing the collaboration is in itself a challenging task, which requires strong leadership of the coordinating actors in the collaboration.
References


