

# An introduction to the horizontal coordination of public policies: Usefulness, facilitating factors, obstacles, and current challenges

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This briefing note is intended for all managers in the health and social services sectors, as well as for public health actors who would like to see this type of approach established within their government so that health can be better taken into account in all policies. Those who are called upon to manage programs, projects or public policies involving multiple sectors with a determinant impact on population health will find here an overview of the usefulness of the horizontal (intersectoral) approach as compared with traditional approaches. This document presents the challenges and benefits specific to the horizontal approach, along with a summary of current thinking on the subject. It also includes examples of common practices tied to this approach. This approach should make it possible to better integrate health into all policies and to develop and implement healthy public policies. Managers familiar with horizontal approaches will find here an up-to-date review of current developments, as well as some avenues for reflection on their own management of horizontal approaches.

## What constitutes the horizontal approach?

Firstly, it should be acknowledged that the question, “Have you ever collaborated with other government departments, the private sector, or the general population within the context of work on a public policy?” would be answered in the affirmative by a significant number of civil servants.

Everyone has, either at the initial or at a later stage, with varying decisional roles, been involved with public policies where some form of the horizontal approach was put into practice. The horizontal approach to public policy refers to a case where “anyone or any organization, when reflecting on a situation, formally considers who else has an interest in this situation and tries to associate that organization or that person with development in this area in an effort to promote the general interest” [translation] (Bourgault & Lapierre, 2000, p. 16). In other words, the

horizontal approach refers to “any joint activity by two or more agencies that is intended to increase public value by their working together rather than separately” (Bardach, 1998) including “the processes and structures of public policy decision making and management” (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012). In referring to coordination, management or governance, some use the descriptive terms horizontal, cross-cutting, whole-of-government, joined-up government, corporate, or intersectoral. While each term has a nuanced meaning, each mechanism is associated with a certain scope of ambition and with certain way of working tied to cooperative work.

The horizontal approach is distinguished from, but often complements, silo management. While silo management relies on vertical mechanisms established by organizations and adhered to by the actors involved, horizontal management relies on mechanisms that are jointly developed by participating actors and modified according to how the situation progresses. Silo management is centred around a classic pre-established organizational structure, with the aim being to carry out actions within a traditional field (health, agriculture, labour, etc.), whereas the horizontal approach is centred around a fluid structure, with the aim being to carry out actions within a non-traditional field, one that is either located at the border between the participants’ traditional fields of action, or that reflects the interdependence of these fields. This approach is practised within a single department, within or across levels of government, between national administrations, or to form associations between the private, non-profit and public sectors.

The horizontal approach has support in several countries. For example, the European Commission and Brazil are developing a training program focused on intersectoral coordination, and several reports on sustainable development point out the need for horizontal

## Briefing Note

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collaboration (Berger & Gjoksi, 2009); in Argentina, the Cabinet of Ministers commissioned a study on the challenges of public policy coordination (Jefatura, 2010); in Finland, the Prime Minister's Office has made this approach a strategic priority (Prime Minister's Office, 2011); and in Canada, the vision statement of the Clerk of the Privy Council, Blueprint 2020, supports the whole-of-government approach (Clerk of the Privy Council, 2013). The horizontal approach cannot, in 2014, be described as merely a fad. The Canadian federal government has been supporting this type of management for several years: a working group of deputy ministers was set up in 1996, a database of horizontal initiatives has existed since 2008, and guidance on the governance of horizontal initiatives is available (Centre of Excellence for Evaluation (CEE), 2012).

#### IN BRIEF

The horizontal approach:

- Is a method of working that involves several organizations;
- Is characterized by a collaborative culture;
- Seeks to promote the interests of all the actors involved and of the public, or to promote coherent government action;
- Requires the management of border zones between actors and between organizations.

## The diversity of horizontal mechanisms

#### Varying mandates:

- Information exchange
- Project planning and management
- Sharing and strengthening of expertise

#### Varying forms:

- Formal
- Informal

#### Three governance models:

- Around a lead organization
- Shared governance
- Network governance

The term “horizontal” extends to a variety of horizontal mechanisms, subjects of horizontal management and types of partnerships.

Firstly, everyone has heard of interdepartmental committees, intersectoral working groups, networks of departmental respondents, leaders’ groups, etc. All of these established mechanisms involve multiple organizations and call for a horizontal approach.

#### TYPES OF MANDATES

Horizontal mechanisms differ according to their mandate: some create a space for information exchange where few or no decisions are made; others allow the content of a project to be determined, along with how it is to be sustained, implemented and ultimately evaluated; others, lastly, are focused on knowledge sharing and the strengthening of expertise within a field or a particular administrative area (Bourgault, Simon, & Turgeon, 2008).

#### FORMS OF NETWORKS

Horizontal approaches can be put into practice by means of formal or informal networks. Formal networks, the type discussed in this text, involve formal structures and individuals linked by their roles and responsibilities within their organizations, and most often rely on relationships that develop through a hierarchical process (Binz-Scharf, Lazer, & Mergel, 2012). Informal networks develop through interpersonal relationships that are not necessarily linked to a hierarchical process and usually form outside the context of institutional procedures (Binz-Scharf et al., 2012).<sup>1</sup>

Horizontal mechanisms also differ according to the subject which is the focus of the horizontal approach. Two particular cases can be distinguished. It is possible to coordinate projects, programs, or policies whose components are sectoral and fall fully within the jurisdiction of their respective sectors (e.g., the fight against street gangs involves the departments of health and social services, of justice, of public safety, etc.). These policies have been developed upstream under silo management, and subsequently, during implementation, some level of cooperation is required of partner organizations and

<sup>1</sup> The development and fostering of informal networks are not to be neglected, because of the role they play in facilitating future interactions, working out methods for the development and implementation of policies, and promoting the dissemination of information on such policies among bureaucratic staff, elected officials, the media, etc.

departments. This could be described as the horizontal coordination of several policies or as multisectoral policy. Another case is the coordination of intersectoral action that is developed in collaboration by several sectoral organizations or departments. This is more a case of the joint construction or co-development of a single policy than of the juxtaposition of a group of separate policies. This could also be described as the horizontal approach, but as applied to an intersectoral policy. Thus, horizontality can refer to both the shared management of existing sectoral policies and to a joint policy.

### MODES OF GOVERNANCE

A public organization can play one of the following three roles in a horizontal approach: leader, partner, or administrator. A lead organization is responsible for coordination. The other organizations then act as partners. When coordination is carried out by an organization external to the group, it then plays the role of a third party administrative organization. Thus, there are three types of network governance structures: the “lead organization” model gives rise to governance that may tend toward centralization; the “participant-governed” model is based on leadership and on shared intervention on the part of network participants; and the “network administrative organization” governance model relies on the creation of a new structure which is given responsibility for network governance (McGuire & Robert, 2007; Provan, Fish, & Sydow, 2007; Provan & Kenis, 2007). Modes of interaction, decision-making, and communication, as well as other related issues can vary according to the mode of governance chosen to manage the horizontal approach. Thus, managers must define and adjust the respective roles, tools, and modes of communication appropriate to a given horizontal approach.

#### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- Determine the mandate (awareness-raising, consultation, expertise building, co-development)
- Determine the role of each participating organization
- Draw on previous experiences with the horizontal approach

## Why implement a horizontal approach?

#### Advantages tied to:

- The common interest
- The motivation of human resources
- The mobilization of expertise
- Knowledge building
- Conceptual adjustments
- Trust in public governance
- The appropriate use of financial resources
- Efficient management

### GENERAL ADVANTAGES OF THE HORIZONTAL APPROACH

Why does a horizontal approach mobilize individuals and organizations? Because stakeholders are highly attuned to the following aims: sharing information (as at the Integrated Terrorism Assessment Centre (Bourgault et al., 2008), preventing or ending conflicts, optimizing the use of now-scarce resources (the operation’s support services that are shared locally), coordinating action, achieving more successful outcomes, confronting crises together to create a shared culture (Anderson, 1996), or a common approach to issues. Depending on the case, some approaches to horizontal management are better than others at ensuring that health is taken into account or that healthy public policies are developed. It may be necessary, for example, to coordinate activities or, alternatively, to create a shared culture.

### SPECIFIC ADVANTAGES OF THE HORIZONTAL APPROACH

For health, the horizontal approach seems indispensable for several reasons: the issues are multifactorial, particularly with regard to the determinants of health, which fall under the responsibility of several departments (environment, public safety, employment, etc.). In addition, population-based interventions rely not only on the public system, but also on coordination of the actions of private-sector stakeholders and citizens. The context that defines effective public health action calls for the optimal use of public resources without the duplication of services. The government, which has limited resources despite facing enormous challenges in the area of health, needs departments

to work together toward a common goal. The horizontal approach to public policy seems indispensable and is put to widespread use within public administrations (Sproule-Jones, 2000). Senior managers must devote a considerable portion of their time to its practice (Bourgault, 2007). An effective horizontal approach to public policy and public intervention addresses the aforementioned challenges.

Applying the horizontal approach to health is beneficial in many ways. Studies examining several areas of activity, presented below, demonstrate significant improvements in the speed of implementation, the management and the scope of mandates. Indeed, the short-term impacts on the dynamics of interactions among actors, on conflict resolution and on the emergence of innovative ideas are evident (Jacobsen, 2006; Provan, Fish, & Sydow 2007). Certain projects were able to progress more quickly with a horizontal approach than they would have under silo management (Bourgault, 2002b, p. 316).

Leaders and managers interviewed about the perceived benefits of horizontal coordination point to the following benefits (Bourgault, 2002b, p. 40):

#### **Advantages tied to the common interest**

Horizontal collaboration emphasizes the common interest on behalf of the ultimate beneficiary, that is to say, the population and citizens. The aim is to rise above conflicts related to the protection of respective areas of responsibility and to work for the benefit of the community and the taxpayer rather than for the benefit of one's organization. Thus, there is a shift, or a refocusing of the primary function of public officials on serving citizens.

#### **Advantages tied to the motivation of human resources**

A collective project is a priori motivating for workers dedicated to efficient public action. The motivation of human resources is based on tangible levers (for example, payment linked to performance in the private sector) and on intangible levers. One such lever which is highly valued is the opening up of a space where everyone feels useful, where everyone can contribute to the achievement of a common goal and where everyone gains knowledge through exchanges. Horizontal mechanisms are able to create such spaces, provided that the flow of

exchange is not unidirectional, with decisional power restricted to one side.

#### **Advantages tied to the mobilization of expertise**

Experts from many sectors, organizations, and jurisdictions share their knowledge and engage their rational abilities. Complementarity and combined expertise placed at the service of a project or program of general interest generally serves to enhance the content of the project.

#### **Advantages tied to knowledge building**

Each expert can gain awareness and learn from colleagues, which fosters reciprocal learning. Ultimately, updated evidence is assimilated and developments within partner organizations are adjusted (Smits, Denis, Preval, & Duranceau, 2012). A more comprehensive formulation of the project should emerge.

#### **Advantages tied to conceptual adjustments**

Sometimes, the knowledge of each participant and a clarification of their respective fields of action complement the scientific and empirical knowledge exchanged. Through discussion, participants move beyond the prejudices that inform their divergent positions, leading to a reassessment and clarification of inter-organizational conflicts that receive support by hierarchical structures (Bozeman, 2000).

#### **Advantages tied to trust in public governance**

"Nothing contributes more to taxpayers' perception of the public sector as inefficient than conflicts between levels of government or between agencies at the same level" [translation] (Bourgault, 2002b, p. 42). Public administrations must communicate with each other and avoid acting as if the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing.

#### **Advantages tied to the use of financial resources**

It is possible to share the fixed costs of a project or program approved and implemented by several organizations (infrastructure, secretariat, communication strategy, etc.).

#### **Advantages tied to efficient management**

Within the government, an outcome is achieved at lower cost when organizations do not duplicate each other's work or hinder each other's progress, and when they create synergy through partnership.



## Obstacles to the horizontal approach

Tied to initiative  
Tied to organizations  
Cultural obstacles  
Tied to individuals  
Tied to the politico-administrative system

Innovative approaches always encounter certain obstacles. Below are five types of obstacles that apply to horizontal approaches (Bourgault, 2002b, pp. 43-47).

### TIED TO INITIATIVE

For innovative approaches and horizontal approaches, some obstacles can be said to be specific to the proposed initiative. A particularly innovative initiative or one that is ambitious in terms of its means and ends faces more significant obstacles than a more modest initiative involving few actors. An initiative that is politically or socially sensitive will also raise obstacles. Peters (1998a) also notes that initiatives involving organizations whose objectives are either too similar or too dissimilar give rise to particular challenges. The horizontal approach is thus liable to encounter obstacles because of the involvement of multiple actors. Managers must therefore introduce appropriate strategies, tools and even, if necessary, special methods for carrying out horizontal work.

### TIED TO ORGANIZATIONS

Other obstacles are related to the organizations concerned. The relationship between levels of government can set the interests of different public organizations at odds, even though they work for the same citizens and are funded by tax revenues (Webb, 1991). Thus, competition between organizations can undermine cooperation (Bourgault & Lapierre, 2000). All parties must be able to arrive at a shared global perspective. Arriving at such a perspective is a process that requires, at least initially, a significant investment of time and effort (Bakvis & Juillet, 2004). Some organizations deem the transactional costs to be excessive (Bourgault & Lapierre, 2000). Certain authors question whether the necessary political leadership, along with the leadership of central agencies, is devoted to the success of such initiatives (Bakvis & Juillet, 2004; Bourgault & Lapierre, 2000). Managers of the

horizontal approach must therefore promote a mode of communication that supports the emergence of a shared win-win perspective.

### CULTURAL OBSTACLES

Cultural obstacles also come into play: corporatism and the bureaucratic interests of organizations, with the associated perception of certain jurisdictional rights as pre-established and exclusive, create resistance (Bardach, 1998). Competition for visibility, funding, and client groups also play a role (Peters, 1998a). For these initiatives, honest, open cooperation must be privileged over dominance, which constitutes a break from the old way of doing things (Burlone, 2001, p. 33). Managers of the horizontal approach must, for example, ensure that the respective interests of participants are given proper consideration and are adequately recognized.

### TIED TO INDIVIDUALS

Some obstacles are tied to individuals: will they be at ease with their dual allegiance to the project team and to their parent department? How will they manage questions of loyalty and ethics, if faced with a dilemma? Will their career path become unclear: does it lie with their parent organization or with the newly created networks? (Bourgault & Lapierre, 2000). Managers of the horizontal approach must anticipate potential conflicts tied to the dual allegiance of actors (to their department and to the horizontal approach) and take appropriate measures, such as inviting discussion of loyalty issues and finding compromises that do not endanger the success of the initiative.

### TIED TO THE POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

Finally, still other obstacles are tied to the politico-administrative system. Traditional accountability for results and for the management of time, budgets and risks must accompany project development. Who will evaluate the initiative? According to what criteria? Who will evaluate the individuals involved in the project? How does one evaluate a joint performance? The novelty of the approach calls for candid and calm experimentation in this area (Bourgault & Lapierre, 2000). Managers of a horizontal approach must make use of tools (e.g., a schedule negotiated on the basis of the sectoral policies under development that will soon be made public) and methods for monitoring and measuring performance (e.g., common indicators measuring

shared goals as well as consistency and redundancy of government actions) that are adapted to the project, but which the actors in participating organizations find satisfactory.

#### POSSIBLE AVENUES FOR OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

- Determine the potential benefit for each participant
- Identify the individual attributes that incline one positively toward horizontal coordination
- Develop appropriate new management tools

## Facilitating factors for horizontal approaches and best practices

What are the preconditions for a successful horizontal approach? It is necessary to take into account a variety of factors specific to the context of the horizontal approach.

Formal committees do not always produce the desired operational outcomes when they are located far from the field or when their members are directed remotely by central authorities. Thus, before starting, the idea must be tested to see if it is pragmatic; the support of the relevant organizations must also be confirmed.

Ostroff stresses that the project design must be based on a clear mandate, the identification of relevant actions and the specification of target clientele (Ostroff, 2000, p. 17). Before starting, it could be advisable to clarify who stands to benefit from the horizontal approach. It is also necessary to specify which actions will be sectoral and which will be intersectoral, and how they will be coordinated in the field. In the same vein, Bourgault highlights some key principles: assign global responsibility (not segmented) for processes; target key cross-cutting processes; define the key element as the beneficiary-user and not the work process; establish that the power to make operational decisions should reside with those carrying out the process; and encourage close cooperation between actors (front-line public workers) in the field and those supplying resources (such as funds, lists, offices, computer services, visibility, recognition, etc.) (Bourgault, 2002a, p. 258).

## THE FACILITATOR'S ROLE

Once the preparation is completed, how does one successfully implement a horizontal initiative? The facilitator of such an initiative plays a crucial role: the facilitator sees himself or herself as the person in charge of the mission rather than as the president/secretary of a committee. It is up to the facilitator to manage group cohesion; a record of the group's work must be created and protected; the group's progress must respect the reality of its participants; the group must be able to concretely support the mandates of its members, since a chain is only as strong as its weakest link; and knowledge of how to apply multiple accountabilities focused on the desired outcomes is required (Bourgault, 2002a, pp. 264-270). Thus, coordinating, listening, group management and synthesis skills are essential to the facilitator of a horizontal approach. Other essential skills, individual or organizational, include the ability to think ahead, to create effective structures, to adjust procedures and to support the governance practices tied to horizontal approaches.

Once the project, program or policy has been implemented, how can it be strengthened and maintained? The authors referenced (Bourgault, 2002a, p. 259; Bourgault & Lapierre, 2000) enumerate several success factors for consolidating and ensuring the sustainability of the horizontal approach: create teams with a diversified membership; allow stakeholders autonomy and provide them with the necessary training; select participants who focus on solutions rather than on problems; ensure that government departments become "partners in performance" rather than turf protectors; ensure that each participant remains responsive to the authorities from whom he or she received a mandate; from the outset, establish performance reporting for the mechanism; and finally, ensure that the group set up to carry out a horizontal initiative remains relevant and, if not, dissolve it as quickly as possible.

**THE SKILLS REQUIRED TO WORK WITHIN THE  
CONTEXT OF A HORIZONTAL MANAGEMENT  
APPROACH**

In conclusion, let us stress the importance of developing specific skills for working across organizational interfaces. Indeed, actors engaged in this approach must be aware of the importance of possessing and developing the skills that are required for networking and for working horizontally. These skills are as follows:

- Be able to view systems globally, and research and understand the interests of potential partners;
- To be able to map individual and shared interests;
- Be able to convey one's vision and be convincing;
- Be capable of establishing and managing partnerships;
- Maintain a pragmatic perspective focused on the targeted population group.

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**Authors:**

Jacques Bourgault, consultant and associate professor at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and the École nationale d'administration publique (ENAP)

Pernelle Smits, research associate at the École nationale d'administration publique (ENAP)

**With the collaboration of** Louise St-Pierre, National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy (NCCHPP)

**Based on preliminary research by** Nathalie Burlone, University of Ottawa

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