

Transformational Change by 2030: Countering the Gravitational Pull Towards 'Business as Usual' in the Public Sector



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2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a marathon:

The common theme across the 22 [Voluntary National Reports \(VNRs\)](#), presented during the 2016 [UN High-Level Political Forum \(HLPF\)](#), was about the critical role of institutions in ensuring coherence, integration, and multi-sectoral involvement in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This was also echoed during the recent follow-up and review processes at the [Regional Forums for Sustainable Development](#), convened by the UN Regional Commissions, to feed into the VNRs at the 2017 HLPF in July.

The [UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration \(CEPA\)](#) held its sixteenth session from 24-28 April 2017 in New York. One of the papers before it was on [Institutional arrangements for the Sustainable Development Goals](#), authored by two CEPA experts. Among others, this paper argues that the 'best approach' to ensure coherence and integration in SDG implementation at the central level and between central, regional and local governments level is through horizontal and vertical **coordination**, respectively, and with a **mix of strategic and operational level arrangements**: (a) Management Committee for high-ranking officials; (b) Steering Group/Coordination Committee for working level coordination; and (c) Cross-organizational Working Groups for technical/sectoral specialists (p. 6-7). Although critical, institutional arrangements and coordination alone won't guarantee results, especially when there are innate political and operational complexities surrounding coordination and institutions.

The paper also argues that those institutional arrangements will allow the specialists to "work together and learn to think beyond their own specialization and consider other elements and perspectives" (p. 7). This appears to make light of the array of 'push and pull' factors in every step of 'working together' in **any** inter-agency space, including concerns around pervasive hierarchy, excessive power and authority, fear of loss of control, suspicion, diminished visibility, and lack of trust.

It is important to note that the 2030 Agenda is not a sprint, but a marathon with an arduous path. There are (and will be) political, economic, institutional and capacity challenges, as well as routine staff turnovers testing its **sustainability** along the way. The litmus test, therefore, is how to make the **process of transformation** really **stick** from the get go?

Collaboration and collaborative dimensions:

In a sector that is comprised of "upstream core ministries and central agencies, downstream bodies including sector ministries, and non-executive state institutions" ([World Bank](#), 2012, p. 1), divisions, frustrations, tensions, and conflicts are a norm. According to a management expert, matrix organizational structures "in reality are forums for confusion and conflict....[B]ut the matrix is here to stay, and so it is critical that we understand how to work within it" (Lencioni, P. 2006. [Silos, Politics, and Turf Wars](#), p. 205).

Over the last several decades, a considerable body of public management research has examined *collaborative* relationships in different settings, including definitions, concepts, as well as key dimensions that foster and maintain effective relationships. Although there is no 'one-size fits all' approach to problem solving, Thomson & Perry have offered the most widely used definition: "*collaboration is a process in which autonomous actors interact through formal and informal negotiation, jointly creating rules and structure 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, A. J & James L. Perry. 2006. [Collaboration Processes: Inside the Black Box](#), p. 23).

In advancing their definition, they also view collaboration as a “puzzle” consisting of **five dimensions** which need to continually and systematically be **measured** and **balanced** by those engaged in collaborative processes:

Governance dimension focuses on partners making joint decisions on about the rules that will govern their behaviour and relationships. There can't be one authority over another, and contestation and conflicts only occur at the margins. **Administrative dimension** is concerned with structures and actions necessary to achieve effective collaboration. The key dilemma here is managing the inherent tension between self-interests and collective interests. **Autonomy dimension** calls for reconciling individual and organizational goals and identities to move forward. Unless a problem is of sufficient urgency to all partners, individual interests will override collective interests. **Mutuality dimension** is about forging mutually beneficial interdependencies based either on different interests or on shared interests to produce “win-win” arrangements for all concerned. **Trust and reciprocity dimension** is linked to participants' faith that others are putting in their fair share of effort and compromise. Participants must believe that they will not be taken advantage of. A collaborative environment that can foster trust, empower, and address obstacles that have the potential to turn colleagues into competitors must be created (see, p. 24-28, for detailed description of each dimension).

There is also consensus among scholars that collaboration is the **higher level** of collective action than cooperation or coordination. **Cooperation** is considered as short term; informal relations; no clearly defined mission, structure, and planning effort; individuals retain authority; resources are maintained separately; no risk; and lower intensity. **Coordination** is longer term; more formal relationships; focus is on a specific effort; authority still retained by individuals; resources and rewards are shared; power can be an issue; some intensity; some planning is required; and more communication needed. **Collaboration** is also long term but more pervasive relationship; commitment to a common mission; comprehensive planning; shared commitment and goals developed in partnership; well defined communication channels at all levels; collaborative structure determines authority; resources are shared; power might still be an issue; higher intensity; and leadership, resources, risk, control and results are shared (p. 20-30).

Countering gravitational pull:

Below are some key lessons, drawn from Thomson & Perry, which may help to garner and maintain personal ownership of processes.

- **Development process:** Building collaboration is a developmental process that takes time and considerable effort. While each agency shapes its system differently, a governance or organizational structure must emerge to address issues such as visioning, strategic planning, clarify authority, responsibility, and accountability.
- **Leadership:** Person(s) assuming leadership in working and/or technical level processes must have a clear picture of what is to be accomplished and how to do it. Without that picture, important tasks may not get done, momentum will be difficult to build, enthusiasm may wane, and some may become alienated and withdraw from active participation.
- **Open and honest:** The lead/coordinating agencies must be very open and honest from the outset. They must play an honest broker role; understand agencies will protect their own identities; and make sure outcomes reflected group consensus, not coalitional or power politics. Most importantly, not taking excessive advantage of another even when the opportunity is available.
- **Buy-in:** Any process must answer the ‘what’s in it for me’ question for each partnering institution. The necessary requirement for successful collaboration is the “self-interest motive”, meaning each organization justifying its involvement by understanding how its organizational goals can be advanced. Moreover, when individuals are incentivized for collaborative behavior, partnership synergy is more likely to emerge.
- **Protecting identities:** Participating organizations in a collaborative relationship have both individual and collective identities to protect. This, however, will lead to a tension between ‘organizational self-interest’ and ‘collective interest’.

- **Relinquish control:** For effective collaboration, all partner agencies must understand and agree that they will relinquish some control over processes, procedures, and resources to support and fulfill collective mandates.
- **Systems thinking:** This is crucial. It requires agencies to look beyond their own needs and consider the effects of their actions on other agencies. This, however, will take time, especially in a system where agencies have competing roles and missions, where politics may frustrate interagency cooperation, and where power is often defined by an agency's share of resources.
- **Communication:** Communication that creates an open and credible process and identifies and addresses challenges is a must. True communication takes place only when all parties understand the message.
- **Trust and transaction costs:** Trust has also been found to reduce transaction costs by reducing negotiation costs and by reducing conflict between organizational partners. Reduced transaction costs, in turn, can improve organizational performance.

Collaborative mindset:

Policy coherence and integration in the context of SDG implementation no doubt require various institutional arrangements and coordination. In establishing such arrangements, however, one must be cognizant of the challenges sectoral institutions would face in 'communicating well within an integrated approach', primarily due to them being so embedded in different policy environments and developing different working cultures (CEPA, p.7).

Issues facing sectoral institutions were also touched upon during the recent [2017 ECOSOC Integration Segment](#). For example, the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) noted the need to 'nurture' various sectoral institutions to engage in integrated policy work, especially through proper cross-sectoral management and governance arrangements. Another expert argued that higher-level 'political will' would be meaningless if it was not accompanied by the 'bureaucracy'.

These remarks resonate well with what a business transformation expert has concluded recently: **"You can lead a transformation from the top, but you can't do a transformation from the top. Success lies in getting the whole government machineries to feel personal ownerships in the transformation"** (Azzarello, P. 2017. [MOVE](#), p. xv-xvi).

In any process of transformation, the "Middle is where you need not just the continuation of desired intentions, but real, defined work to happen" so that the transformational change can begin to take hold (Azzarello, p. xv). Both 'cooperation' and 'coordination' may still occur at the initial stages of any process, but fostering *collaboration* from the get go can help organizations to reach beyond their means and achieve complex policy goals. If not, "the gravitational pull for people to go back" (p. xv) to 'business as usual' is enormous.

Over time, the cumulative (and, hopefully, long-term) benefits arising from the accumulation of many small but meaningful results can be profound, provided we can "set aside our infatuation with instant gratification and commit to sustained effort for the long haul" ([Brian Levy](#). 2015). This also requires a collaborative mindset, trust and greater Public Service Motivation (PSM). With these, "you don't leave the same way you came in. There's some sort of change.Something new has to be created. Something happens differently because of the process" (Thomson & Perry, p.20). The five collaborative dimensions, combined with above lessons, could offer some perspectives to hold things together, including through personal ownerships, and to **"keep the wheels of implementation turning"** (President of the UN General Assembly. [Briefing to the Group of 77 and China](#). 28 February 2017).

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