



'Joined-up' local governments? Restructuring and reorganising internal management

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BOOK REVIEW

'Joined-up' local governments? Restructuring and reorganising internal management, by Hilde Bjørnå, Stephan Leixnering and Tobias Polzer, Vienna, Facultas Verlags-und Buchhandels AG, 2017, 230 pp., €38.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-7089-1374-2

The wave of new public management initiatives replaced traditional hierarchical organisational bureaucracies consisting of specialised, differentiated units with organisational autonomy and differentiation (Hood 1991). This fragmented government departments and agencies and led to a need for greater coordination – what became known as 'joined-up government' (JUG).

Effective coordination is most feasible when multiple approaches are combined with one another (e.g., horizontal coordination, market incentives, bottom-up approaches), supportive architecture and leadership is in place, and both formal and informal control mechanisms are used (Rainey 2014; Wegrich and Stimac 2014; O'Flynn et al. 2011). Coordination seeks to address challenges occurring from non-coordination such as *underlap* (for instance, when no organisation performs a task and therefore *lacunae* appear) or *overlap* (for instance, two organisations perform the same task and there is *redundancy*), and can be hampered by turf tension like agency resistance to control by other bodies (Wegrich and Stimac 2014; Wilson 1989). In certain contexts, coordination is a feasible strategy for overcoming lacunae, redundancy and incoherence issues, improving cost-effectiveness and the quality of services for citizens, and helping to create synergy across agencies (Pollitt 2003; Peters 1998). However, just because coordination is feasible does not mean it is desirable; often costs overshadow benefits. Perhaps surprisingly, few empirical accounts exist as to whether JUG initiatives result in these benefits at the local level of government in Europe.

Hilde Bjørnå, Stephan Leixnering, and Tobias Polzer's book 'Joined-up' Local Governments? Restructuring and Reorganising Internal Management leverages the powerful tool of exploratory case studies in order to examine human experiences of the design and implementation of municipal JUG across six European countries. By contextualising different design and implementation scenarios, the book reveals that the concept of JUG is dynamic and therefore there is no one-size-fits-all process for policymakers to follow. From a managerial perspective, JUG necessitates careful change management strategies that include training and allowing staff the flexibility to adapt goals where needed.

In addition to these management implications, the authors use organisational theory to convey that JUG structures can also determine the efficiency and effectiveness of an initiative. Readers will find the analytical framework (Table 3.2, p. 90) based on Askim et al. (2011) useful for explaining that one-stop-shops, for example, can take on different organisational forms depending on dimensions such as: the

task portfolio, participant structure, the level of the participant's autonomy, proximity to citizens, and instruments used. Those dimensions can then align with values such as 'shallow vs. deep' to depict the breadth of the policy area and the depth of the process of the initiative. Another valuable aspect of this book is that it serves as a fantastic reference guide to coordination, because each case study examines a different type of JUG activity, ranging from new ways of delivering services (e.g., one-stop-shops with several government agencies) to new ways of working across organisations (e.g., pooled budgets).

The authors reveal several challenges within the case studies, such as siloed thinking, unanticipated technical issues, and a lack of coordination capacity. During the implementation of a one-stop-shop for the City of Berlin (OSCB), for example, two levels of barriers were identified. First, due to the fragmented and highly autonomous nature of organisational units in Berlin, the multilevel institutional setting made steering from the central coordination unit extremely difficult. Despite the use of market-based incentive approaches to entice district cooperation through seed funding and pilot project participation, more tactics were needed. This exemplifies Peters' (2009) suggestion that managers often need to combine approaches to coordination for feasibility purposes. In addition to market-based incentives, OSCB would have benefitted from more horizontal instruments to promote integration between organisational units, as well as more formal mechanisms for control like joint strategies (Hood 2005). Second, within the organisational setting, technical and operational setbacks ultimately prevented OSCB from being implemented. For example, decision-makers failed to foresee that they would require legal approval to coordinate data sharing across agencies and departments due to variations in ethical standards. Consequently, differences in cultural norms, values, and procedures must be taken into consideration when planning JUG initiatives, in order to build smarter practices that create avenues for effective knowledge sharing and information exchange (Bardech 1998).

Another obstacle that the book identifies is that the external political environment can push down a JUG arrangement that is in line with central values and objectives, but may not meet local needs. In Hungary's Local Governmental Application Service Centre Project, maintaining heavy control and centralisation over local governments became the priority of the technology project. As a result, local authorities lost the freedom to decide what best suited their individual needs, because it was all centrally developed, maintained, and forced upon participants. The main lesson here is that formal command and control arrangements are not the only option in this scenario, and it is important to distinguish between politically based, centralised, vertical control and a central unit that only aims to coordinate and steer.

A final theme of barriers to JUG is recognising coordination in a holistic way that orchestrates many different factors. Although informal mechanisms like ad hoc meetings can bring individuals together across agencies, failure will ensue if other technical and operational issues are not addressed. This is illustrated by the BTI project for young people at risk in the Tromsø municipality of Norway. The main implication is that technology-based solutions lose traction if the coordination problems associated with their implementation distract attention away from the individual to whom the service is being delivered.

JUG is a broad term that has been lacking in empirical studies that reveal the extent to which its various forms have delivered their objectives. Bjørnå, Leixnering, and Polzer's book touches on the local level of coordination where organisations are often directly responsible for affecting the quality of services citizens receive. While the authors provide a variety of examples in European local JUG initiatives, it is clear to the reader that each situation is starkly different due to the cultural, political, and environmental factors at play. Nonetheless, the book succeeds in its goal of creating better conceptual understandings, analytical frameworks, and empirical accounts of how best to join-up government.

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