P134 / Collaborative Public Policy Across Levels of Government: Institutions, Middle Managers, and Policy Coordination

Topic : Multilevel Governance and Local Policy

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Contemporary public policy challenges increasingly require coordination and collaboration across different levels of government, administrative institutions, and organizational boundaries. Issues such as emergency management, sustainability, urban development, public service delivery, and digital transformation cannot be effectively addressed by a single governmental actor. Instead, they require collaborative arrangements that connect national policy objectives with local knowledge, institutional capacities, and implementation practices.

Existing scholarship on multilevel governance, collaborative governance, and intergovernmental relations has emphasized the importance of institutional arrangements, networks, and coordination mechanisms in shaping policy outcomes. Ansell and Gash (2008) identify institutional design, leadership, trust-building, and collaborative processes as central elements of collaborative governance, while Emerson et al. (2012) provide an integrative framework linking collaborative dynamics to broader institutional and systemic contexts. Research on multilevel governance further demonstrates how informal and procedural interactions contribute to decision-making across governmental levels (van Popering-Verkerk & van Buuren, 2016). However, important questions remain regarding how collaboration is initiated, maintained, and translated into effective policy action, particularly when formal institutional structures are fragmented or insufficient.

While traditional governance perspectives frequently distinguish between top-down policy direction and bottom-up implementation, growing attention to the roles of intermediate actors suggests the need to examine the processes occurring between these levels. Originally developed in the context of energy transitions, the middle-out perspective highlights how middle actors can influence change upward, downward, and laterally through their agency and capacity (Parag & Janda, 2014). Its subsequent application to public health governance demonstrates how intermediary actors may shape policy formulation, resource allocation, and program continuity within administrative settings (Kranzler et al., 2019). Research on English subnational governance also highlights the challenges associated with intermediate territorial levels of governance, particularly regarding accountability, institutional responsibilities, and coordination (Shaw & Greenhalgh, 2010). Middle managers, regional administrators, and other intermediary actors may serve as institutional brokers, facilitating communication, negotiating competing priorities, translating policy objectives, and building trust across governmental boundaries.

This panel seeks to explore how collaborative public policy emerges and operates across levels of government, with particular attention to the institutional, organizational, and individual mechanisms that enable or constrain coordination. By integrating collaborative governance scholarship with middle-out and multilevel governance perspectives, the panel aims to examine not only the institutional conditions for collaboration but also the administrative actors and practices through which coordination is achieved.

The panel addresses four interconnected research questions:

1. How do formal and informal institutional arrangements shape collaboration between national, regional, and local governments?
2. What roles do middle managers and intermediary actors play in coordinating policy processes, translating objectives, and bridging institutional boundaries?
3. How do transparency, information sharing, trust, and accountability influence intergovernmental collaboration and policy implementation?
4. Under what conditions do collaborative governance arrangements contribute to more coherent, responsive, and effective public policies?

The panel invites critical examination of whether intermediary actors can compensate for institutional

fragmentation and whether informal coordination mechanisms complement or undermine formal accountability structures. It also encourages investigation of how administrative capacity, institutional incentives, organizational cultures, and crisis conditions affect collaborative practices. Lahat and Sher-Hadar (2020) further emphasize that collaborative governance is not universally beneficial and propose examining the values, situational considerations, and contextual conditions under which collaborative arrangements should be promoted, while research on emergency organizations in Israel demonstrates that public trust is associated with general trust in the public sector, perceived organizational readiness, and perceived threats of emergencies (Mizrahi et al., 2021). These findings provide a basis for examining how collaborative mechanisms operate under different administrative and policy conditions.

By bringing together theoretical, comparative, and empirical perspectives, the panel aims to advance understanding of the mechanisms connecting institutions, administrative actors, and policy coordination. Its broader contribution is to deepen scholarly debates on collaborative governance and multilevel policymaking while identifying institutional and managerial practices that may strengthen public policy design and implementation. More specifically, the panel seeks to connect institutional explanations of collaborative governance with the middle-out perspective, thereby advancing understanding of how intermediary actors influence coordination, accountability, and policy implementation across governmental levels.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites theoretical, empirical, and comparative contributions examining collaborative public policy across different levels of government, with particular attention to institutional arrangements, middle managers, intermediary actors, and policy coordination mechanisms.

Building on established scholarship on collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012), multilevel decision-making (van Popering-Verkerk & van Buuren, 2016), and middle-out approaches to institutional and policy change (Parag & Janda, 2014; Kranzler et al., 2019), the panel encourages contributions that examine the interaction between institutional structures, intermediary actors, and collaborative policy processes.

We welcome papers investigating how national, regional, and local governments interact in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of public policies, as well as the formal and informal processes through which collaboration is established and sustained.

Contributions may address, but are not limited to, the following themes:

- Multilevel Governance and Intergovernmental Relations: Institutional arrangements, vertical and horizontal coordination, and the distribution of responsibilities across governmental levels.
- Middle Managers and Intermediary Actors: The roles of regional administrators, public managers, policy brokers, and boundary-spanning actors in facilitating collaboration and translating policy objectives into practice.
- Collaborative Governance and Institutional Trust: Mechanisms of trust-building, transparency, information sharing, negotiation, and accountability among governmental actors.
- Formal and Informal Coordination Mechanisms: The relationship between institutionalized cooperation, informal networks, administrative discretion, and policy effectiveness.
- Policy Implementation and Administrative Capacity: How organizational resources, institutional incentives, and managerial capabilities influence collaborative policymaking.
- Collaborative Governance in Times of Crisis: Intergovernmental coordination, adaptive governance, and institutional responses to emergencies and uncertainty.
- Comparative and Cross-Sectoral Perspectives: Comparative studies of collaborative policy arrangements across countries, administrative systems, and policy sectors.

The panel particularly encourages research that moves beyond normative assumptions about collaboration and critically examines the conditions under which intergovernmental cooperation succeeds, fails, or generates unintended consequences. In particular, contributions are encouraged to examine whether and how intermediary actors strengthen collaborative capacity, bridge institutional fragmentation, and influence the relationship between formal governance structures and actual policy practices.

We welcome qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, comparative, and conceptual papers. Contributions from different national and institutional contexts are encouraged to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogue and identify both context-specific and generalizable mechanisms of collaborative public policymaking.

The panel aims to foster a theoretically informed and empirically grounded discussion on how institutions and public managers can strengthen policy coordination across governmental boundaries and advance collaborative governance across diverse institutional contexts.

References

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