

INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COLLABORATION AS A SOURCE OF INNOVATION IN PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Barbara Kozuch
Jagiellonian University, Poland
barbara.kozuch@uj.edu.pl

Katarzyna Sienkiewicz-Małjurek
Silesian University of Technology, Poland
Katarzyna.Sienkiewicz-Malyjurek@polsl.pl

Abstract:

Innovations in public management tend to be defined as creative ideas put into practice; of management seeking to resolving persistent problems faced while pursuing the public interest. Inter-organizational collaboration fuelling the effective accomplishment of ventures launched within organizations is regarded as one of the methods for creating and implementing innovations. Therefore, the overarching objective of this paper is to investigate the correlations between inter-organizational collaboration and creation of organizational innovations.

The paper was drawn from literature studies and empirical research. It gives an insight into requirements for inter-organizational collaboration in public management with an emphasis on creating innovations. Furthermore, the innovative process in public management was illustrated as well as innovative inter-organizational collaboration was defined as creating cutting-edge ideas, concepts and methods for untangling specific problems underlying management by numerous organizations through their engagement in common enterprises and consolidation of resources, knowledge and ingenuity. Overall, this collaboration takes into account organizational and legal requirements and relies on previous positive relationships and capabilities enjoyed by individual organizations to build and advance rapports with other organizations. Literature studies were partly illustrated with empirical findings from research conducted in 2010 in commune offices located in the south of Poland (in the Małopolskie province). Surveys carried out led to affirming that though the needs and benefits in terms of creation of innovations as part of inter-organizational collaboration in public management attained visibility and recognition, though common practice within local government units fails to reaffirm this. Different replies to the implementation gaps of inter-organizational collaboration have been rendered, but there was no conclusive answer about how to achieve implementation.

Keywords: inter-organizational collaboration, innovation, public management, collaborative relationships, public sector

1. INTRODUCTION

The increased degree of complexity inherent to the processes occurring today in organizations and their settings generates the urgency for collaboration which transcends the boundaries of the single organization and increasingly even the boundaries of whole sectors. This process comes to the forefront both in private enterprises as well as in contemporary public institutions.

The need for inter-organizational collaboration within public sector originates from the fact that an organization and the course of social life hinge on the complex system of operations run by multiple organizations, institutions and services included in the process of delivering public services. In essence, public services may have administrative character (e.g. granting documents, permits, licenses), social character (e.g. health protection, public safety, culture, education system, social welfare) or technical character (e.g. water and sewage management, energy supply, waste management) (Kožuch & Kožuch, 2011). Also, they may assume the form of e-services. The scope and configuration of public services are contingent on the needs reported by the society and the capacity of the government and territorial local government to respond to the demand reported, and the responsibility for their fulfilment within a specific territory was statutorily assigned to basic units of public administration – local government. Meanwhile, growth of social and economic life increasingly outstrips the potential for meeting citizens' expectations by local government authorities as to the type, quality and creation of innovations while delivering public services, thereby producing a gap in their provision. Inter-organizational collaboration due to improvement of efforts made, in the wake of consolidation of resources, goals and actions, plays a significant role in closing the gap (Karbownik et al., 2012; Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2011). Therefore, it appears to be of primary importance to identify the correlations between inter-organizational collaboration and the creation of organizational innovations in the public sector.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Innovation in the public sector

Innovation research initiated by J. Schumpeter's study currently embraces a variety of scholarly domains (e.g. management, sociology, psychology), analysis levels (e.g. team, organization, economy) and occurrence aspects (e.g. processes, types, attributes, consequences) (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012; Schumpeter 1960). The issues concerned with innovativeness have moved to the mainstream of research carried out in the public sector, and are today considered as an essential driver propelling the enhanced accomplishment of government and local government tasks, a source of competitive advantage and economic growth (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006; Walker, 2006. Salge & Vera, 2012).

Innovative shifts in the sphere of organization and management are distinguished by: varied degree of saturation with innovations, adequacy for new theories and concepts, step changes in operational circumstances, technological breakthrough, capability to produce results that match modified mission (Kožuch, 2011, p. 138; Martínez-Sánchez et al., 2009).

Specifically, it is assumed that a minimal requirement for enabling innovation is to introduce a new or significantly advanced service, process, marketing method or organizational method. These include services as well as processes and methods, both devised for the first time, as well those adopted from other organizations (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012; Lee, Olson & Trimi, 2012). Drivers behind innovations encompass external environment (among others, a level of urbanization, natural resources, unemployment rate and birth-rate), internal environment, that is the organization itself (among others, organizational complexity, funds, external communication, collaborations and trade unions activities) and its leader (Damanpour & Schneider, 2006; Wejnert, 2002; Hansen, 2011; Elenkov et al., 2005).

Innovations in public management are typified as creative ideas implemented in management practice geared for resolving persistent problems faced when realizing public interest, e.g. increasing access to public services. The majority of them include organizational innovations (Kožuch, 2011, p. 138). Organizational innovation compared with other organizational changes is widely defined as first-time implementation of new organizational method in the, embraced by the organization, manner of conducting business, workplace organization, external relation which is a consequence of strategic

decisions made by managing personnel in the organization (Oslo Manual, 2005; Damanpour et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2012).

2.2. Inter-organizational collaboration in the public sector

Inter-organizational collaboration, that is positive cooperation, covers lasting and well-structured relationships, resource flow and other interactions between specific organizations seeking to attain both common as well as individual targets (Kożuch, 2011; Damanpour & Schneider, 2006; Kratzer et al., 2004; Bullinger et al., 2010; Kożuch & Przygodzka, 2012). From the perspective of the relationship strength, inter-organization collaboration proves to be more potent than network relationships, cooperation and coordination, and may precede full organizational integration (Axelsson & Bihari Axelsson, 2006; Camarinha-Matos & Afsarmanesh, 2012). Partnership inter-organizational collaboration is open-ended in its nature, which marks the principles guiding this collaboration including, among others, honesty, trust and mutual respect. Beyond that, this collaboration is an effect of evolution of mutual linkages.

All in all, legal regulations exert the utmost influence on collaboration between public organizations (Kożuch, 2011, p. 5). They set out the assignments and entitlements for these organizations as well as obliging them to enter into contacts and undertake joint initiatives. Central to that are also organizational requirements such as objectives, values and resources possessed, allocation of tasks and competencies as well as responsibility and authority, as well as circumstances under which organizations operate and their relations with external settings (Kożuch 2004, s. 96; Tubin & Levin-Rozalis 2008; McGuire & Agranoff, 2011).

The significance of collaboration in innovative economy and regional development is highlighted in the Strategy 'Europe 2020' which is a long-term programme for social and economic growth within the European Union. One of the priorities adopted in the model for European social market economy is smart growth; that is development of an economy based on knowledge and innovation. In this realm, the flagship initiative launched by the member states, regional and local authorities is the EU as the "Innovation Union". The project posits that across the global world it is essential to incorporate all entities and regions: small, medium-sized and large enterprises, all sectors, including public organizations and social economy and citizens themselves ("social innovations) into the innovation cycle. Inter-organizational collaboration through boosting the activities creates a new value in the form of the manner for accomplishing objectives set. It may, thus, be a source for organizational, product, process, marketing and other innovations.

3. METHODOLOGY

Literature studies embraced an extensive body of international scholarly output with regard to inter-organizational collaboration and management innovations. Additionally, the organizational documents of the European Commission, e.g. flagship strategy of the Europe 2020 strategy, or the strategy for smart, sustainable growth being conducive to social inclusion were analysed. Whereas empirical studies were conducted in 2010 in commune offices located in the Małopolskie province as part of the project funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education in Poland entitled 'Intra-organizational requirements for effective collaboration between public and non-governmental organizations within a local environment' in 2008-2011 (project number: NN115 123534). The surveys centred on the persons involved in making and implementing the decision on collaboration, as well as staff decisions. These include commune mayors or persons serving as their deputies, specialists servants charged with personnel issues and collaboration with non-governmental organizations. The following tools were applied in the survey:

- framework methodology for examining internal documents of the organization;
- individual survey questionnaires designed for commune mayors, personnel specialists and specialists responsible for collaboration with NGOs;
- research auditorium questionnaires developed for public management experts;
- non-standardized interviews.

All survey questionnaires contained common questions, the most of which were targeted to commune mayors and personnel officers, that is, the persons exercising a critical impact on people as participants of organizational processes, thereby allowing for exposure of the core issues from varied perspectives.

On the whole, the survey attracted 140 persons, including 34 commune mayors, 34 personnel specialists, 34 collaboration specialists and 38 public management experts. In view of the inconsistency and deficiency in answers given, a portion of the questionnaires were discarded. Overall, fully completed questionnaires as well as those comprising more than single answers were retained. In the interests of obtaining unequivocal answers, choice such as “I don’t know” were excluded from the questionnaire. An aggregate of 130 questionnaires, 29 questionnaires by commune mayors, 32 by personnel specialists, 31 by collaboration specialists and 38 questionnaires by experts were qualified for further analyses. The expert group was scarcely differentiated due to the profession practised and the function held. The majority of them (33) were employed in higher education institutions. Local government officials included 3 persons, one person from the consultancy company and one person from the NGO. Among them there were 7 professors and 25 holding doctorate titles. The bulk of the experts (14) enjoyed job seniority ranging from 11 through 20 years, up till 5 years – 5 persons, and 7 persons each fell to the range 21-30 and 31-40, whereas 2 persons had a job tenure of over 40 years. All experts had experience in investigating public management – the largest group (14) declared their interest in public management for 5 years and less, whereas 8 persons each reported their interest for 6-10 and 11-15 years. In occasional cases the interest in the scientific field under analysis was reported to be several dozen. Accordingly it was presumed that public managers and civil servants – autonomous specialists and experts in public managements were individuals possessing sufficient experience and expertise on issues concerned with handling public matters at the local level, and their opinions may serve as an appealing illustration for discussions surrounding the linkages between inter-organizational collaboration and creation of organizational innovations in the public sector.

4. RESULTS

Empirical studies executed show that responsibility for inter-organizational collaboration largely rests on the commune mayors as executive authorities in the communes. Equally, the tasks in this respect are also performed in such departments and offices such as: organization and social affairs department, local social welfare centre, educations and department of health care development, promotion and development department, citizen affairs department, crisis management and commune development division, commune secretary together with an organizational department of the commune. In essence, it was determined that the primary manner driving inter-organizational relationships is a straight establishment of collaboration.

3/4 of the respondents reported that tasks as part of inter-organizational collaboration are frequently or very frequently executed. These findings are corroborated by the number of annual schemes for collaboration with NGOs. Over recent years such programmes have developed in a growing number of offices. For instance, from among 34 offices surveyed in 2005, 17 pursued such programmes. In consecutive years the number burgeoned up to 31 in the years 2008 and 2009. While in 2010 27 offices under survey crafted such schemes. However, it should be stressed that as proved by non-standardized interviews with management practitioners – the prevailing situation is that programmes adopted often fail to be accomplished. Meanwhile, informal collaboration hardly ever occurs. In practice it becomes commonplace that collaboration between an office and civic organizations takes on a formal character, not necessarily abuzz with definite actions.

An analysis of involvement of stakeholder groups in setting the objectives and harnessing opportunities for collaboration reveals that these tasks are chiefly performed by commune mayors (28 answers) and commune councillors (25) in charge for setting strategic objectives. Then, this role is performed by selected civil servants (20) and afterwards fourth in the rank all non-governmental organizations (16) and selected non-governmental organizations or organizations representing them (10). Thus, the bigger role in setting the objectives for inter-organizational collaboration was attached to the offices investigated. By and large this supports the role of the office as a dominant partner repeatedly emphasized by civic organizations.

The studies have found that collaboration is pursued with a possibly marginal commitment from both parties. The potentials for collaboration entailing coordination, cooperation and partnership collaboration are barely fulfilled in the practice of local government management. Work in advisory teams, joint participation in national and regional contests or designing a local partnership programme for promoting successes of collaborating non-governmental organizations rather defines future possibilities for collaboration. Furthermore, modelling the relations between offices from local

government administration with civic organizations is typified by a high level of inertia. Civil servants are more apt to respond to social initiatives than to form conditions for joining in the processes of co-governance of territorial communities. The civil servants surveyed declare that they understand the weight of collaboration between public and civic organizations, though it fails to trigger systemized activities fostering this collaboration. In effect, this implies the declarative character or putting into practice legal regulations to the minor extent aimed to obligate the offices to efficient collaboration across sectors.

According to the civil servants, the critical reasons behind taking decisions to collaborate are: undertaking activities beneficial for local environment (25 answers) and discharge of the legal duty (14 answers). Nearly 1/4 of those surveyed argued that boosting the efficient functioning of the office tends to be a driving force behind collaboration. Such opportunities as fulfilment of previous obligations, acquiring additional resources and good interpersonal relations emerged in 2-4 answers. Importantly, it was also found by the respondents that crucial benefits gained from inter-organizational collaboration involve: effective satisfaction of citizens' needs (105 out of 130 answers), devolution of powers in the process of public affairs management (112 answers), sharing the knowledge (38), opportunities of exchanging information (29), more efficient functioning of an office (21).

An analysis of day-to-day operations of offices in context of inter-organizational collaboration enabled the claim that experts (30 answers) clearly underlined the prevalence of the culture of avoiding collaboration. In their opinions the offices focus on their own tasks and internal stakeholders. Yet, mayors (15 answers) and employees dealing with collaboration (16 answers) predominantly argued that they bolster their own efficiency due to collaboration with other organizations based on principles of reciprocity. Some mayors (7 answers) and specialists (8 answers) acknowledged that their offices concentrate on their own tasks and internal stakeholders. A group of several personnel officers discerned that offices value the collaboration with NGOs, and thus they strive to preserve the present structure unchanged, thereby favouring consensus. Though the fewest indications were given to the situations when the setting of the office is not amicable and simultaneously dynamic and turbulent which implies a continuous boost to competitiveness.

For those surveyed the key constraints and barriers lie in the lack of sense of responsibility for the final outcome specified in plans and schemes. Of the 130 respondents the answers were provided by 115 persons – the remaining had no views on that topic. This constraint was ranked the first – 64, the second – 17, and the third – 11. Specifically, this suggests that the surveyed civil servants are unfamiliar with a results-oriented approach, they have inadequate understanding of their own contribution into the delivery of public services. It may also indicate shortcomings in planning and strategic management.

Other barriers and constraints frequently cited were goals which were too broadly formulated and unawareness of the link between the actions undertaken and the mission of the office. Adoption of too many procedures is perceived as a further obstacle thwarting effective operations by the office employees. Principally, it results, equal to the lack of the sense of responsibility, from a huge barrier of red tape whose origins may be chiefly traced to the necessity to comply with legal regulations and, paradoxically, to the urgency of operations transparency. Nevertheless, in practice the level of bureaucracy is excessive as civil servants are not groomed to handling public affairs in any manner other than bureaucratic. Changes to electronic document circulation or elements of e-administration as well as methods of communication with citizens and other clients of the offices have not transformed organizational behaviour patterns. Such a barrier scored one of the top three ranks among 28 persons.

Slightly fewer respondents, 24 persons, reported that an impediment to effective operations may lie in prioritizing particular private interests of organizational cells. Fundamentally, this is a typical threat prevailing in all types of organizations. To overcome such ineffectiveness requires possession of a high degree of universal competencies by public managers.

Surveys completed, in effect, led to identifying essential determinants for launching of development and innovation actions in the field of collaboration between non-governmental and public organizations whose compilation was illustrated in table 1.

The determinants for innovative collaboration between public and non-governmental organizations outlined in table 1 point out that creation of innovation in public services necessitates not only appropriate organizational and legal conditions as well as strong financial potentials of public organizations, but, above all, a collaboration culture embedded in trust and engagement.

Table 1: Requirements for collaboration between public and non-governmental organizations to promote innovation creation

	Collaboration initiated by public organizations with NGOs	Collaboration initiated by NGOs with public organizations
internal requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – democratic and participatory management style, – competencies of public managers (among others: self-awareness of attributes and competencies, ability to set strategic objectives, proficiency in creating conditions for collaboration, capacity to coordinate public policies, programmes and projects carried out with varied partners, ability to participate in social life, motivation to initiate activities for the benefit of others) – flexibility of public organizations, including simplified process for taking decisions and propensity for harnessing a variety of collaboration forms, – creation and transformation of organizational cells into task forces, – networking linkages, e.g. social networks, consortia and networks based on ownership rights such as public-private partnership, – HRM in offices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – transformational leadership co-creating culture and organizational structures reinforcing collaboration and innovations, – commitment to collaboration with public organizations, among others, in the area of workplace organization, creation of organizational structures favouring collaboration, – propensity for creating extensive networks outside an organization, – exploitation of cooperation within larger public structures, – trust to public organizations, – institutionalization and professionalization of management (among others, employment of in-house staff, extensive and purposefully designed a track record of projects completed, stability of operations, – high organizational competencies, – strong specialization of goals and concentration of operations.
external requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – legal regulations, – applied management model, – exploitation of democratic mechanisms, – ethics in operations, – level of involvement of stakeholders in management processes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – funds from the European Union and a system of its application (enhance independence and activity of NGOs), – creation of cross-sectors teams focused on vital social problems and a quality of public services, – symmetry in establishing objectives and manners for execution of public tasks between public and non-governmental organizations, – economic potentials of public organizations (communes, districts and regions) as the source of innovations in local government units may lie in the capacity of local government units to acquire external funds and multi-organizational horizontal bonds in the form of local governance.

Source: study based in research conducted illustrated in: Kozuch, 2011; Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2011.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on research completed, it was argued that inter-organizational collaboration in public management has the character of a traditional activity when providing services, without alterations or innovations effected. It was noted that launching of joint actions is a barely exploited manner of handling public affairs by basic territorial units. Meanwhile, all organizations may take well-orchestrated measures in favour of the common good. Besides, it is imperative not to infringe the functioning principles typical of each organization.

On top of that, it was underscored that internal matters of offices surveyed and their settings are approached differently, which leads to the assumption that a bigger emphasis is placed on the procedures of formulating objectives and tasks, and less on the procedures connected with their accomplishment. Probably it is an effect of a long-standing stressing of the importance of strategic management and at the same time underrating the capabilities of operational management.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the benefits yielded by inter-organizational collaboration are identified in Polish practice more seldom than in reference literature, and they pertain to their poorly advanced forms. Such collaboration, in effect, is formal in its character and constraints to handful of initiatives, and it is only pursued to an extent which does not involve changes to the structure and organizational culture.

As a consequence, the restricted level of inter-organizational collaboration impedes creation of innovations in public management. Meanwhile, social and economic needs and technical possibilities initiate innovative solutions and form the conditions fostering collaboration. Specifically, this is corroborated by the findings which expressly reveal that in practice of offices, direct responsibility for inter-organizational collaboration is vested in civil servants as one of their tasks specified in the activities scope. Civil servants are rather bent to responding to initiatives and ideas put forward by these organizations as they are saddled with other assignments in the office, they fail to centre on incentives to collaborate, fail to take the initiative to commence joint and innovative projects. Nevertheless, it may be observed that in local government management, inter-organizational collaboration is gaining in importance.

Offices attach certain significance to inter-organizational collaboration as it is required by applicable regulations. However, until now organizational behaviour patterns which would prompt partnership collaboration have not been established and widely disseminated,. Therefore, inter-organizational collaboration, being in the initial developmental phase, fails to be a tool for resolving problems underlying management of public affairs in basic local government units throughout Poland, and it is, hence, not fully harnessed to create innovations in public management. Given the ongoing tendencies in the development of European societies, it may be concluded that the commitment of offices to collaboration with stakeholders is a matter close at hand.

Thus, deliberations held support the view, present in current public management output, that collaboration between organizations serves as the source for innovative ideas and solutions. In the same vein, its paucity stifles creative ideas. Whereas the need to implement new activities or measures to practice of local government management facilitates entering into inter-organizational relationships. This enables to arrive at the conclusion that there are strong, positive correlations between inter-organizational collaboration and innovation creation in public management. Beyond that, beneficial conditions for collaboration, furthering creation of innovation may be labelled as innovative inter-organizational collaboration which may be defined as creation of novel ideas, concepts and methods for addressing specific problems underlying management by multiple organizations through their engagement into common ventures, and consolidation of resources, expertise and ingenuity. Such collaboration integrates organizational and legal requirements and rests on previous positive relationships and capacities, enjoyed by individual organizations, of forming and strengthening relations with other organizations.

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