Linked-up government
Building connections for greater impact

William Eggers, Andrew Medd, Rosemary Williams, Pankaj Kishnani, and Gustav Jeppesen

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NO AGENCY CAN address on its own most of the daunting catalog of urgent challenges that society faces—from unemployment and public health to poverty and climate change. In 1997, Tony Blair, then prime minister of the United Kingdom, coined the phrase *joined-up government* for effective coordination across government entities, a concept that became popular across the globe. However, success proved elusive due to challenges such as siloed funding and lack of enabling technologies.[1]

Government leaders are still trying. Data-sharing technologies are helping to break down silos and connect government agencies. And today, the linked-up government approach is improving service delivery and tackling *wicked* problems by building collaborative engagement.

The pandemic has aided the cause by highlighting the increased urgency for collaboration across silos. As many agencies scrambled to respond to the crisis, they found themselves working across portfolio boundaries, formally and informally, and forging partnerships. Information-sharing across agencies and within a wider ecosystem allowed nations to identify and track infections and quickly develop vaccines and antiviral medications.

The COVID-19 collaborative response provides an important model for the future.

Trend drivers

- **Cloud technologies** have made it easier to share and exchange data within and between agencies and other sectors.

- **Rising public expectations** are pressuring agencies to provide effective, coordinated, and integrated services. During the initial days of the pandemic, social media played a key role in communicating citizens' expectations of their governments.

- Agencies worked **across portfolio boundaries** on pandemic response and recovery—and the results demonstrated the power of linked-up government.

Trend in action

The trend, then, is toward *coordinating*, *collaborating*, and *linking up* government through joint efforts across multiple levels of government, missions, and programs. In the last few years, we've seen a plethora of such efforts around the world.

ORGANIZING FOR CROSS-AGENCY COORDINATION

Thirty US states have established "Children's Cabinets," interagency partnerships intended to support child and family development—interests that were often addressed by a wide range of agencies delivering services in piecemeal fashion, especially when it came to low-income brackets.[2]

Maryland's Children's Cabinet, a collaboration between the state's departments of health, human services, juvenile services, education and management, and budget, has worked with the Governor's Office for Children to increase child immunization rates and reduce infant mortality and child maltreatment.[3] It also publishes periodic well-being scorecards to track its progress.[4] Similarly, Virginia's Children's Cabinet assembled state and local agencies and community stakeholders to improve outcomes for attendance, suspension rates, nutrition, and school accreditation in priority communities.[5]

Similar efforts can be observed at the US federal level. In 2011, Congress directed the Office of Management and Budget to develop cross-agency initiatives to "improve performance and management across the federal government."[6] One cross-agency priority (CAP) goal required an increase in federal facilities' electricity consumption from renewable sources to 30% by 2025.[7] By the end of fiscal 2015, direct greenhouse gas emissions by federal facilities had declined 17.6% from the fiscal 2008 baseline.[8]

Another CAP goal resulted in reducing security clearance backlogs from 725,000 cases in April 2018 to 200,000 in 2020.[9] Another call for modernization of the permit process led to the creation of an online dashboard for agencies, project developers, and the public, which tracks environmental reviews and authorizations for large or complex infrastructure projects.[10]

The United Kingdom established the Better Care Fund (BCF) in 2015, which is shared among the National Health Service, two other health and social care departments, and the Local Government Association to deliver integrated health and social care. Another interagency fund, the Shared Outcomes Fund, received £400 million in funding to address issues such as recidivism, violence, disinformation, drug enforcement, and refugee transitions.[11]

Singapore formalized cross-agency coordination on security issues back in the 1970s; in 2004, it broadened this effort by organizing the Homefront Crisis Executive Group (HCEG) to spearhead a whole-of-government approach to crisis management.[12] During the pandemic, the country created the Multi-Ministry Task Force (MTF) supported by the HCEG to manage its response to the situation. The MTF activated immigration and border authorities almost immediately, supported by civil defense officers.[13] Backed by leaders across government, it aimed to build public trust through daily media briefings and accurate reporting of COVID-19's spread.

INTEGRATING SERVICES TO MEET CONSTITUENT NEEDS

Integrated service delivery allows constituents to access multiple, coordinated services based on their needs. It breaks down silos, improves information-sharing, and reduces duplication to

Intergovernment and multisector initiatives
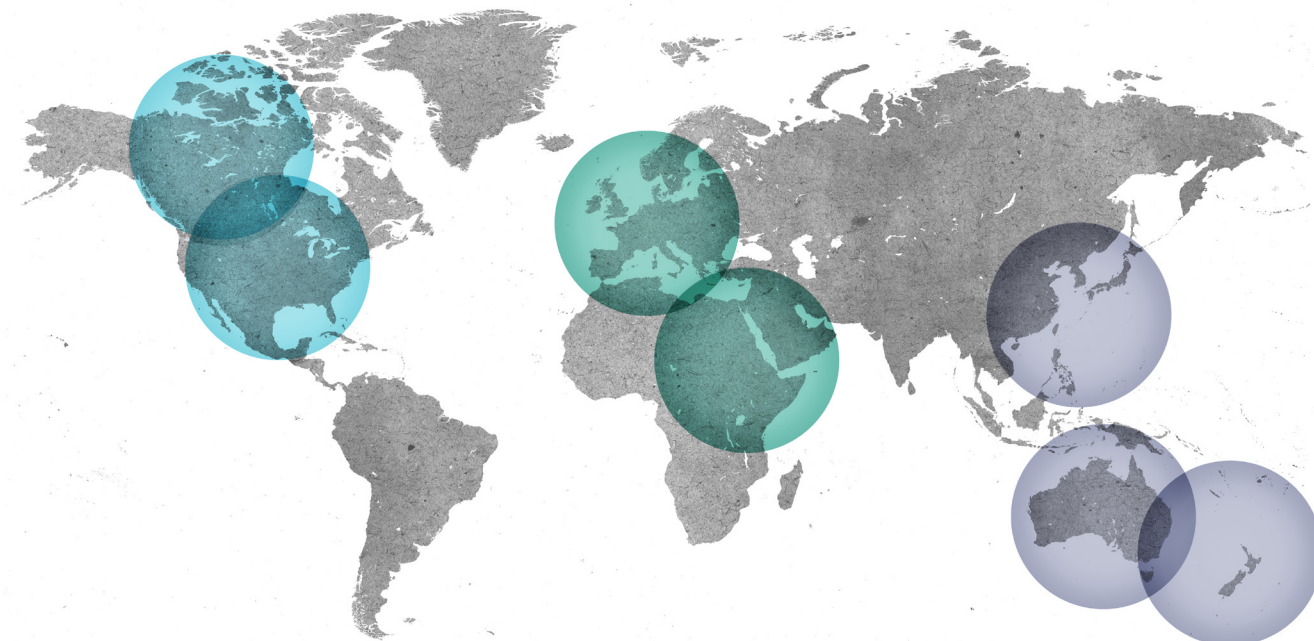
Americas

Canada
Canada is taking a **whole-of-society approach** to tackle the opioid crisis.

United States
More than 30 US states have set up **Children's Cabinets**.

EMEA

Estonia
Estonia mandates **interagency data-sharing** by prohibiting agencies from asking citizens for information more than once.

Germany
WHO Hub, set up by the WHO and Germany, offers a platform for participants to detect, respond to, and find solutions for public health emergencies.

Ireland
The **Health Ireland** framework takes a whole-of-society approach to address lifestyle issues that lead to adverse health outcomes.

Rwanda
To address stunting, Rwanda launched a **multisector program** that addresses health, nutrition, and social protection.

Saudi Arabia
Saudi Arabia has put **government agencies, the private sector, and citizens** on track to reduce per-capita water consumption to 150 liters by 2030.

United Kingdom
The UK government, to accelerate vaccine development, launched a **task force** to coordinate research efforts with industry and academia.

Asia-Pacific

Australia
Australia has adopted a **whole-of-government approach** to mental health, incorporating stakeholders outside of the health care sector.

Japan
Japan has focused on **public-private partnerships** to build resilient infrastructure that can withstand nuclear and other disasters.

New Zealand
The New Zealand government pools **funding for courts, police, and other justice sector agencies** to allow flexibility.

Singapore
Singapore established **an office to improve interagency cooperation** on municipal issues.

deliver better outcomes for recipients, families, and communities. For instance, an agency delivering unemployment insurance can work with workforce development boards to see if an individual needs work training. Similarly, an unemployment insurance agency can share information with other social care agencies to determine whether the individual qualifies for cash assistance, food programs, or public housing.

In 2017, to combat increasingly disparate health outcomes in different regions in the country and rising obesity nationwide, the UK National Health Service (NHS) created integrated care systems, a new form of partnership among administrative organizations, health care providers, government agencies, and other local partners, intended to integrate all aspects of client care.[14] These systems assemble a broad range of stakeholders into a body that operates on three principles: *coproduction*, the idea that all members of the collaborative are equal partners and no one partner "owns" the program's output; *personalized care* that involves individuals in their own health care choices; and *incentive contracts* for service providers focused on achieving improved health outcomes.[15]

Similar approaches are underway in the United States. Maryland's Department of Human Services has led an effort to create a cloud-based hub designed to integrate health and human services.[16] This Total Human-Services Integrated Network (MD THINK) helps agencies design more effective programs by offering both a comprehensive view of citizen needs and secure access to master data management. MD THINK also aims to reduce overall operating costs by eliminating redundancy.[17]

The Philippines, in turn, is integrating its mental health services.[18] The nation's Department of Health has joined with the Education Department to add emotional resilience into its life-skills curriculum for school students, and with the Department of Labor and Employment to implement workplace-based mental health interventions.[19]

TACKLING "WICKED" PROBLEMS

The scope, complexity, and seeming intractability of many pressing societal issues require coordinated approaches. Intractable, open-ended, "wicked" problems—a term coined in 1973 by design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber—demand holistic thinking and cross-agency coordination.[20]

The homeless population is particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, UK local authorities, health agencies, and nonprofits launched a program called "Everyone In" to provide *every* UK resident with an opportunity to self-isolate during the pandemic. The program helped move 37,000 vulnerable people to hotels, B&Bs, and other temporary accommodations; leaders set up an interagency task force of local authorities and partners to help them stay off the streets.[21]

In 2015, Ethiopia set itself the bold goal of ending childhood malnutrition by 2030. This multisector initiative aims to increase investments in nutrition infrastructure and empower communities to find innovative solutions. Three pillars underpin the initiative:

- Community labs, a multisector group, assemble health care workers, school principals, religious leaders, and other stakeholders to create and test innovative solutions.[22]

- Program delivery units at the federal and regional level then provide technical leadership, facilitate multisector coordination, and track performance management and resource mobilization.

- The Unified Nutrition Information System for Ethiopia tracks nutritional data, visualizes progress, tracks financial allocations, and maps stakeholder capacity.[23]

Despite the nation's ongoing political and social challenges, the program has contributed to a steady reduction in child malnutrition.[24]

Linked-up government is back in the limelight two decades after the Blair government envisioned "joining up." The challenge now is to sustain the momentum gained during the pandemic and avoid slipping back to a siloed mindset that can hinder innovation and agility.

Moving forward

The following factors will be critical to the success of linked-up government worldwide:

- **Finding the right budget balance** for agency and interagency spending by forging agreements on shared priorities and outcomes. Wherever possible, agencies should consider pooling budgets for shared agendas.

- **Establishing interagency councils** empowered to define project scope and success metrics.

- **Building outcome-oriented service delivery units** to implement interagency plans.

- **Creating platforms for civic engagement** to allow citizens and nongovernmental sectors to discuss, debate, and contribute to solutions for complex issues.

- **Investing in technology infrastructure** such as cloud computing to share data and design integrated services.

FAMILY JUSTICE CENTERS IN NEW YORK CITY

In 2001, New York City launched a dedicated office to combat domestic violence: the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence. In 2005, with funding from the US Department of Justice and private donors, this office established its first Family Justice Center in Brooklyn, to centralize and coordinate services for victims of domestic violence. In the following years, the city opened centers in its other four boroughs, each offering counseling, meetings with prosecutors and support groups, and aid with finances, housing, and public benefits.

The justice centers unite the work and support of more than 50 organizations, including nine city agencies and departments, various agencies at the borough and state level, and dozens of nonprofits.[25] In 2019, the city's five centers helped more than 63,000 clients.[26] During the pandemic, the centers pivoted to a fully remote service model. In 2020, the number of survivors accessing services for the first time rose by 32.5%. The centers also saw increased usage of their mental health counseling and legal consultations and facilitated virtual visitation programs for noncustodial parents. In all, 94% of surveyed beneficiaries who received virtual services said they would recommend the centers to others.[27]

MY TAKE

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Breaking government silos through holistic service integration

Vertical accountabilities naturally lead to siloed efforts, siloed policy, and siloed systems in government. Vertical structures and budgets lead public sector executives to continually narrow the scope of their efforts, with teams asked to prioritize staying within budget and minimizing risk. As a result, we end up with gaps emerging between functions and portfolios. You can expand the example to any complex or wicked problem, and you quickly find that the gaps between functionally divided teams and vertical lines of responsibility have created systemic barriers to holistic program and policy delivery.

Meanwhile, the constant pressure to deliver a "good news story" rather than to be a responsible steward for long-term public good has created a culture of prioritizing many efforts as fast wins. Service improvement efforts are often limited to iterative improvements within the scope of an agency, which doesn't address or improve the end-to-end experience of those who interact with government. In many governments, no one is responsible for an integrated experience. The result: a fragmented tapestry of inconsistent services, where public trust and confidence is only as strong as the weakest service provided.

The people and communities we serve shouldn't have to understand the complexities of government just to find the right services. Creating connected government is our responsibility, and we need to establish horizontal levers, structures, and operating models to provide an integrated experience for the public.

We should do a few key things to enable holistic services:

- **Single ownership of the citizen experience:** You can only prioritize, deliver, manage, and ensure a connected experience if someone has a mandate for a connected experience. Consolidated channels can be managed by a single entity with this accountability, with portfolio departments managing programs and back-end business systems. Beyond the mandate, this requires channel delivery and management capabilities and portfolio agencies consolidating their front-end channels.

- **Design connected services:** Beyond a consolidated channel, another powerful strategy is to design services around key life events, such as having a child, moving, starting a business, or dealing with the death of a loved one. These "life journey services" provide a contextual framework that supports an individual to traverse multiple organizations, jurisdictions, and sectors, with more efficient, effective, and proactive public service delivery.

- **Participatory governance:** We need to incorporate the public into the everyday work of the public sector, such as design and delivery of policies and services. If the people and communities we serve are involved in the process, this will help ensure that government is user-centered and truly able to be tapped into and responsive to changing needs and values.

- **Measure the impact more holistically:** Create an all-of-government approach to measuring the impact and user journeys of government services. Agencies will be more naturally motivated to act holistically if they are measured holistically, especially if the measures extend beyond user and performance measures and into policy and quality-of-life measures.

- **Measure risk and impact holistically:** The irony of public sector risk management is that by minimizing the personal risk for executives and for departments, we have created a culture of creating risk for society and the system as a whole. We must start to measure risk holistically and over the long term, in terms of actual impact on people and communities.

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