

WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT: INTEGRATION AND DEMARCATION

In the face of cross-sectoral challenges, the need for coordination in foreign policy has greatly increased. The “Whole of Government Approach” (WGA) facilitates enhanced cooperation between the administrative units of a state. It aims to enhance the effectiveness and coherence of government activities. Such coordination efforts, however, also require time and resources and occasionally supersede substantial implementation goals. Thus, a differentiated application of the WGA makes sense.



Cross-sectoral coordination of government activities is a great challenge: British troops in Helmand, Afghanistan, July 2011. Reuters / Shamil Zhumatov

A Whole of Government Approach (WGA) aims to enhance the effectiveness and coherence of government activities through increased cooperation between different administrative units. Different government departments use a variety of tools and instruments to realize their mandates. These means should be systematically consolidated for the sustainable management of complex tasks that cross the boundaries of foreign, security, and development policy. The idea is to raise effectiveness and efficiency by exchanging knowledge and pooling capabilities among a variety of actors.

In recent years, WGAs and related forms of institutional cooperation have seen broad application. In the fields of crisis management and peace support in particular, vari-

ous states and international organisations – such as the UK, the US, Canada, the EU, or the UN – have experimented with coordination mechanisms and integrated strategies. A number of Western governments have gathered in-depth experience with WGAs, for instance in the field of development cooperation under the aegis of the OECD or in close civil-military cooperation as part of the NATO operation in Afghanistan. This has given rise to high expectations regarding the added value of the WGA.

The concept’s application in practice has also, however, revealed the costs and risks associated with such an approach. Cross-departmental cooperation is often both laborious and time-consuming and may lead to a clash of different worldviews and institutional cultures. For individual actors,

moreover, enhanced coordination usually implies a loss of autonomy – both in practice and in perception. This may set off bureaucratic turf wars. Additional concerns may arise regarding the compatibility of the interests and goals of the administrative units involved.

Governments and organisations therefore face the challenge of optimising the cost-benefit ratio of WGAs. When does the extra effort of cross-sectoral processes pay off? How can these be promoted? Does “Whole of Government” mean that various governmental units are constantly and simultaneously involved everywhere and that all goals must be achieved jointly? Or should certain policy areas be excluded in order to preserve their independence? The experience of pioneers such as the UK shows that WGAs involve not just opportunities, but risks as well. Against this background, a differentiated application of the concept seems to make more sense than imposing a unitary model.

Responding to an expanded security concept

Calls for more coordination in international crisis management and in peacebuilding have grown louder in the past two decades. They can be traced back to the emergence of a comprehensive understanding of security, which broadened state-centric conceptions of security to include the notion of human security. This in turn required better coordination between the activities of the military, diplomacy, development cooperation, and humanitarian engagement. In fragile states in particular, where recurring violence and weak rule of

law impede progress and threaten human development, there is increasing overlap between the different policy areas.

In many conflict and post-conflict situations, such as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or South Sudan, various entities such as state development agencies, UN peacekeepers or other military units, political envoys, humanitarian workers, NGOs, or charitable organisations operate in parallel. The growing number of actors heightens the need for coordination in order to prevent duplication or mutual undermining of activities. Also, there is now a general awareness that even seemingly apolitical activities such as technical or humanitarian aid can have unintended political outcomes. In view of the challenges and risks created by the proliferation of actors and their influence on events on the ground, the demands made of an integrated, coherent approach have increased.

The WGA promotes an understanding of complex problems by bringing together experts from different corners of the government architecture. This approach is designed to enhance the sustainability of programmes as well as their credibility with recipients. In this way, for instance, short-term humanitarian and security-related measures can be geared from the start towards longer-term political and social reforms. Also, the WGA facilitates cost savings through joint use of resources and promises to improve efficiency by combining various instruments. Thus, the drivers in the development of a WGA are not just internal administrative actors aiming to maximise their capacity to act with scarce resources, but also members of parliament who wish to make the most efficient use of taxpayers' money.

There is as of yet no internationally agreed standard model for WGAs. One would also search in vain for a uniform definition of such integrated approaches. In principle, WGAs aim to improve coordination within a given government. In addition, however, states sometimes also aspire to coordinate their activities with those of other state or non-state actors, as a coherent overall strategy at the governmental level is often seen as being necessary, but not sufficient. This is generally referred to as a "Whole of System" approach.

The UK as case study

The UK is among the pioneers in the implementation of a WGA. The country's partici-

pation in the Iraq war as well as the drawn-out mission in Afghanistan have been extremely testing for relations between the Ministry of Defence (MoD), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), and the Department for International Development (DFID). At the same time, the wars were catalysts for the intensification of civil-military cooperation, which was central to the emergence of a British WGA. A variety of innovative coordination mechanisms came about through practical cooperation in joint missions as bottom-up developments. But the top-down institutionalisation of cross-departmental cooperation at the highest levels of decisionmaking was also instrumental. The example of the UK reveals three levels of consolidation in a WGA: Conceptualisation, institutionalisation, and operational implementation.

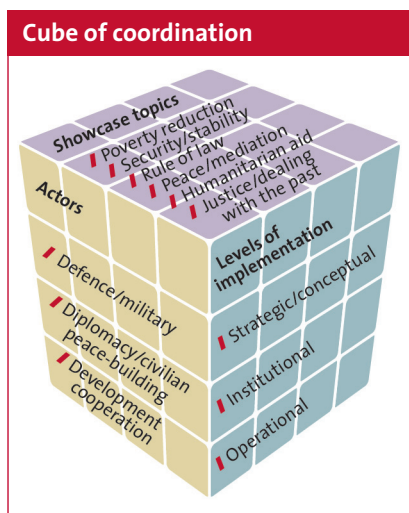
The British experience in Afghanistan shows that joint situation analysis is indispensable. All participants must reach agreement on the nature of the task and the goals to be achieved. A common conceptual framework based on this situation analysis can then form the basis for detailed implementation plans within individual departments. Against the background of the mission in Afghanistan, further strategic coordination mechanisms were developed, such as comprehensive conflict analysis tools and joint guidelines for civilian and military activities in the south of Afghanistan (the Helmand Road Map). The UK made additional efforts to implement cross-departmental strategies in other focus regions such as Somalia or Sudan, i.e., for mainly civilian missions.

A Joint Discussion Note (JDN 4/05) published by the British armed forces in 2006 was for a long time the only doctrine for cross-departmental cooperation. Other government departments were sceptical as to this pioneering role of the military, which was perceived as a leadership claim. It was not until 2011 that a genuinely cross-departmental strategy was published in the form of the *Building Stability Overseas Strategy*. The document employs the broad term "stability" as a common denominator for the UK's peace, development, and security policy engagements. In view of the planned withdrawal from Afghanistan, the strategy introduced a shift in emphasis in the WGA towards missions without a major military presence. According to the strategy, cooperative efforts should also be geared increasingly towards conflict prevention and early warn-

ing as well as in-depth partnerships with regional and local actors. The implementation of the strategy was explicitly entrusted to the triumvirate of the defence, foreign, and development ministers. Since the foundation of the National Security Council in May 2010, the UK government system has also had a high-ranking forum for bringing about the necessary ministerial coordination.

The formal adoption of the WGA at the ministerial level by way of approval of the overall strategy in 2011 was preceded by a host of institutional adaptations. A joint funding mechanism for conflict prevention, peacekeeping, and stabilisation activities has been in place since 2001 for the MoD, FCO, and DFID. The joint decision-making efforts for project financing within the framework of this Conflict Pool have had a beneficial impact on coordination among the three ministries. The transfer of budget responsibility to this body gave it executive powers, alleviating concerns that it was to become a mere talk shop. In 2004, the Stabilisation Unit (SU, originally designated the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Unit) was formed as another entity administered jointly by the three ministries. After a difficult start, the unit has developed into a cross-governmental centre of excellence for the stabilisation of fragile states. It also came to shoulder a large part of the transaction costs for joint analysis and planning. However, the SU lacks the political weight to claim a lead role in coordination between the three ministries. It secures its own institutional survival by acting as a service provider and trying to generate added value within the government architecture.

At the operational level, joint exercises and training modules fostered an understanding between members of the armed forces and civilian experts. The integrated approach applied by the British Provincial Reconstruction Team in Afghanistan, through which soldiers as well as civilian experts deployed together under civilian leadership, received international recognition. Outside the Afghanistan context, the branches of the FCO and DFID are by now co-located either in the same building or in the same compound in approximately 30 countries. The aforementioned SU also took on important service functions for the implementation of the WGA, including the maintenance of a database of civilian experts from various disciplines as well as their training and deployment in conflict areas.



Challenges in implementation

The British experiences in the implementation of a WGA have shown not only positive results, but also a series of challenges. A WGA is not only based on technical or administrative arrangements, but touches on fundamental questions. Among the core challenges are clashes of priorities and differences of mentality. Furthermore, rivalries between government agencies can cause political and bureaucratic problems. Finally, practical obstacles and transaction costs should also be anticipated.

A WGA aims to achieve overarching goals across traditional policy areas. This often requires that the administrative units in question adapt their priorities, which may lead to conflicts of objective. Differences of mentality lead different organisations to approach common challenges with unequal expectations, for instance with regard to timelines and success criteria. While some organisations anticipate a long-term presence in the mission area, others operate in a short-term crisis management mode. The factors leading to differences of mentality and conflicts of objective are often deeply ingrained in the mandates of the respective government agencies. They are reflected in personnel policies, in unwritten codes of conduct, and in strategic documents, all of which contribute to an organisational culture.

The various actors assess the advantages and disadvantages of cross-departmental cooperation in different ways. Sceptics are found, for instance, among humanitarian aid workers and conflict mediation experts. They fear that their integration into a WGA could amount to loss of impartiality in the eyes of local and international stakeholders. This risk increases if, due to cost considerations, civilian and military

personnel share means of transport, installations, and security arrangements in the field. For advocates of the WGA, on the other hand – for instance, at the level of political decisionmaking – the commitment of all administrative units to overarching goals is the main point. From their perspective, demarcation on the part of individual departments undermines the effectiveness of the overall strategy.

The challenges at the strategic-conceptual level are apparent in the case of British development cooperation. The establishment of DFID in 1997 decoupled development aid as an expression of solidarity from interest-driven policy in the fields of trade, politics, and security, both institutionally and in external perception. The new ministry prioritised poverty reduction, which became both its internal *raison d'être* and a powerful message for its external communications. DFID's engagement in conflict zones (which were not necessarily within the world's poorest countries) was therefore long regarded at the leadership level as a distraction from its actual mandate. Ministry employees did not regard conflict-relevant issues and tasks as career-enhancing opportunities. In the context of the Afghanistan mission, there was increased institutional pressure on DFID to cooperate more closely with the FCO and MoD. In military circles especially, DFID was accused of being insufficiently supportive of cross-governmental priorities and of "NGO-like" behaviour. A strategic realignment as well as a change of leadership led to increased engagement of DFID in fragile states. This change of course contributed measurably to a decline in tensions between the ministries.

The implementation of a WGA also triggers bureaucratic reflexes to protect institutional interests. Administrative units used to operating on their own are restricted in making decisions by cross-departmental strategies. Shortages of staff and funds, as well as legal restrictions governing their use (e.g., OECD standards on declaring development funds) may also hamper individual departments' ability to devote resources to joint efforts. It is therefore rare for all participants to contribute equally to the implementation of a comprehensive strategy. However, for outsiders, it is hard to distinguish material constraints or restrictions that are due to international standards from bureaucratic self-interest. Such differences in perception may stoke feelings of suspicion between the administrative units involved.

In the field, where there are acute challenges to deal with, bureaucratic tensions often recede into the background. However, here too, experience shows that cooperation depends highly on individual personalities and is difficult to institutionalise. In Afghanistan, for instance, British troops and civilian experts established a sense of comradeship under testing conditions that was difficult to transport to the everyday bureaucracy at headquarters, where institutional rivalries were more prevalent.

The introduction of cross-departmental structures and processes brings transaction costs. Incompatible IT systems and divergent standards for classifying information may obstruct communication between various layers of administration. Integrated strategies mean increased personnel requirements if each department is to be represented at all levels of decisionmaking. Unless such costs are factored into the budgets, important incentives for cooperation will be lacking. Furthermore, the implementation of the WGA may cause opportunity costs. In the worst case, efforts to improve coordination devour the lion's share of time and resources. The danger in this case is that the actual goals of the WGA, i.e., the enhancement of effectiveness and efficiency in the implementation of concrete projects, will take a back seat.

Differentiated application

Ideally, the WGA brings added value in the form of greater coherence, legitimacy, and sustainability of government activities. In practice, for certain participants, it also brings a loss of influence and restrictions. In principle, all are in favour of "more coordination" – but no one wants to be coordinated. There is no standard solution for this dilemma. A differentiated application of the WGA therefore suggests itself, where the intensity of cooperation and the degree of cooperation may vary according to mode of operation, subject area, and level of implementation.

First, not all instruments and working methods that have proven effective in individual organisations are automatically suitable for cross-sectoral cooperation. Integrated strategies and procedures that are based on the lowest common denominator between participants will fail to achieve the original intent of the WGA. Standardising divergent approaches makes institutional cooperation easier by eliminating friction. However, unitary solutions run the risk of diminishing the ef-

fectiveness of government actions. Overly rigid planning parameters, evaluation criteria, and timeframes do not sufficiently allow for the diversity of working methods and organisational cultures within a WGA.

Second, a WGA does not necessarily suggest itself in equal measure for all fields of government activity. Elaborate internal consultations that involve high transaction costs or may delay implementation can reduce the effectiveness of projects. A common strategy for each area of operation is not necessarily required for achieving coherence between various government activities. Shared criteria may be applied to identify focus countries and areas where cross-departmental cooperation is critical, for instance in security sector reform.

Third, the WGA does not require equal effort at all decisionmaking levels and in each implementation phase. There is a significant demand for accord at the strategic level. Financial and administrative incentives (such as shared budget items) may be helpful in this respect. Explicit appreciation of cross-departmental work in career paths and promotional criteria can help foster cross-departmental cooperation. At the operative level, however, different paths may lead to the same goal. Thus, even in integrated planning processes, one might consider the possibility of entrusting a single (lead) agency with overall responsibility for implementation.

In sum, a differentiated application of the WGA does not aim to proscribe a unitary model, but to combine various approaches intelligently. This may also amount to demarcation of individual fields of application. A WGA should bring together a broad spectrum of diverse perspectives and instruments that no single actor possesses individually. Friction is not only inevitable, but to some extent even desirable here, since it contributes to identifying weaknesses and gaps.

Switzerland and the WGA

Switzerland faces similar challenges as other countries do in the application of the WGA, despite the peculiarities of its foreign policy and its political system. Civil-military cooperation, which is a critical source of tension in countries such as the UK and the US due to their military operations, does not occupy a central place in Switzerland. The focus is on how foreign and economic policy relates to humanitarian, development, peace-building and mediation

efforts on the one hand and on the coordination efforts between development cooperation and civilian peace-building on the other. As on the international level, there have been not only positive experiences with the WGA, but also areas of friction.

So far, the WGA has been developed mainly at the level of implementation. Examples include the coordination of development cooperation and peace-building in Nepal (cf. CSS Analysis No. 125 [↗](#)) or the joint logistics and security platform for experts at the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and Swiss military observers in South Sudan. The main Swiss actors in fragile states – the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Human Security Division at the Directorate for Political Affairs – both belong to the FDFA. However, the civilian peace and mediation work does not have the same human and financial resources at its disposal as the SDC. The two organisations moreover operate with different methods, instruments, and timeframes.

There is no comprehensive guideline for the WGA in Switzerland. So far, little use has been made of opportunities for joint setting of priorities and clarification of terminology at the strategic level. The interpretation and implementation of the WGA concept thus depends predominantly on personalities and ad-hoc measures.

Critical fields of tension at the conceptual level remain unresolved. For example, certain actors engaged in humanitarian work, development policy, or mediation/facilitation fear that an integrated strategy would cause their activities to become subordinate to political and economic interests.

Switzerland as a small state can benefit from a WGA and achieve maximum effect thanks to bundling of resources and expertise in a focus country. This enhances the visibility and influence of Switzerland's engagement at the international level. However, there is a need for better clarification of the parameters of a WGA between administrative units. More in-depth discussion and strategic institutionalisation therefore seem appropriate. In Switzerland, too, a more differentiated application of the WGA may contribute to defusing areas of tension.

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