

Understanding Multi-level, Multi-Actor Governance Arrangements in Human Services: Time for a More Nuanced Approach

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Multi-level, Multi-Actor Governance Arrangements in Human Services: Time for a More Nuanced Understanding

Multi-level governance (MLG) has become a key pillar of the social architecture of many jurisdictions. The concept was originally introduced to portray the complex structure and policy development of European regionalisation and subsequently the European Union. MLG refers to the design and delivery of public policies by an expanded set of public and community actors belonging to different decision levels that are connected via cooperative relationships and collaborative actions (Bache and Flinders, 2004).

Given this heritage, much of the extant literature and research on MLG has tended to adopt a state-centric approach which has directed attention to the themes of fragmentation and integration, describing the emerging structural arrangements and their efficacy as well as the policy transfer processes. While such an approach has generated many valuable insights into the operation and processes of these interactions it has been argued that it has largely failed to uncover the nuances of MLG and that a greater emphasis should be placed on understanding the interactions and intersections of vertical and horizontal actor levels, their motivations and the impact of layers (tiers) on outcomes and sustained change (Stubbs, 2005)

As governments have come to understand their limitations in solving complex and intractable social problems on their own, MLG approaches have proliferated in the broader public and human services fields. However, the interactions between these sets of actors and the effects are not well understood. The child protection arena in Queensland, Australia is an example of a service area that has sought to improve its service provision through the expansion of the actors involved in policy development and delivery (Keast and Waterhouse, 2006). Specifically, the department responsible for child safety has initiated a deliberate strategy of inclusion and collaborative action across a number of domains, regions and layers of service operation and decision making. This provides a relevant case study for developing a better understanding of MLG. The study maps and analyses the complex interactions of these domains, in which tiers of horizontal interaction are interspersed with elements of diagonal and vertical linkage to develop a more detailed and nuanced conceptualisation of MLG. Results indicate that within this multi-tiered, multi-actor setting there is often a disparity in terms of the level of commitment to shared operations because actors can pursue competing and often conflicting interests, and the degree of efficacy achieved.

Drawing on MLG literature and the preliminary case studies of community level governance in child safety/protection arena, this paper concludes that the highly nuanced and often contested situation of MLG requires an extension of the current conceptualisation and methodological approach to MLG. Indeed, the paper outlines and investigates the factors of process, location and the intersection of levels as being worthy of further exploration within the MLG framework. Such an interpretative approach to the examination of inter-related events and interactions at different levels of operation will help to explain the shifting and often contested nature of MLG and its impact and implications. In doing so, it provides those charged with their design, delivery and administration with an expanded understanding of the opportunities and constraints offered by this mode of governance.

References

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