



## Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

## HORIZONTALITY

*Guy Chiasson, Professor*

*Université du Québec en Outaouais*

[guy.chiasson@uqo.ca](mailto:guy.chiasson@uqo.ca)

*With the collaboration of Victor Ntezirembo*

Horizontality is an approach to shared decision-making that fosters synergy among several actors or institutions in the concrete, efficient management of projects, without there being any hierarchical relationship between these actors or institutions; at the same time, emphasis is placed on the relationships between the governing authorities and the governed – particularly, the State and civil society – with all working in the general interest of the community.

For several decades now, the concept of horizontality (or horizontal management) has been a prime topic of discussion among public administration researchers and public managers alike (Bourgault and Lapierre, 2000). According to research by Bakvis and Juillet (2004) and by Bourgault and Lapierre (2000), horizontality refers to an approach to public management rooted in action that is more concerted or coordinated and hence less piecemeal. While the concept of horizontality has entered into circulation only relatively recently, the quest for greater coordination in public management is hardly new. Herman Bakvis and Luc Juillet (2004, p. 9 et seq.) note that in the context of the Canadian federal government, efforts to achieve a higher degree of integration date to Confederation in 1867. For many years, federal central organizations (cabinet, Treasury Board Secretariat, etc.) performed this interministerial coordination role. However, the late 1990s and the 2000s ushered in a strong trend to build structures and launch initiatives targeted at horizontality.

Discourse on horizontality extends far beyond the Canadian federal government, of course. According to an OECD study (1997, quoted in Bourgault, 2002, p. 15), “all member countries seek to improve horizontal and vertical coordination and to adopt more effective measures of collaboration between levels of administration” (our translation). In most Western nations, horizontality has stood out as one of the preferred avenues for modernizing public management (Bakvis and Juillet, 2004; Sproule-Jones, 2000). Among most authors, there appears to be a consensus as to the circumstances surrounding the recent upsurge in interest for horizontality among public administrations (and researchers). One of these reasons is, according to the above-mentioned OECD study, the drive to control spending.

Nonetheless, the rationale behind horizontality is not limited to merely reining in public expenditures. It is also related to the growing inability, beginning in the 1980s, of the “silo” approach to public management (i.e., the Weberian management model) to satisfactorily account for the complexity of contemporary societies. Many actors and experts have called for greater

## HORIZONTALITY

collaboration between the various departments and agencies making up the machine of government and view horizontal management as providing a better fit with modern-day challenges than does the “silo” approach (Bourgault, 2002).

Thus the central issue concerns one of the major modalities of horizontality – namely, coordination between several entities belonging to the same public administration. The four case studies analyzed by Bakvis and Juillet (2004) involved initiatives designed to better align the efforts of several federal departments and agencies with regard to a specific problem or crisis. In the fourth case, the initiative also included the province of British Columbia and the city of Vancouver, thus demonstrating, according to these authors, the capacity of horizontality to assume the form of concerted action between several levels of government. The numerous case studies gathered by Bourgault (2002) make it possible to further expand the scope of the concept of horizontality so as to include joint initiatives involving civil society actors.

The definition emerging from this work is fairly indiscriminating as to the actors involved. Instead, it appears to make room for initiatives that attempt to go beyond three of public management's traditional boundaries: the administrative boundary occurring between the different entities of a given public administration; the boundary between different levels of government; and, finally, the boundary between the governing authorities and those who are governed.

Definitions of horizontality appear to be flexible with respect to the degree of engagement or involvement characterizing horizontal collaboration. On that score, Bourgault (2002) has developed a typology of nine general forms of horizontal management that together present a continuum of weaker to stronger intensity: sharing of information, consultation, consensus, coordination, pooling of material resources and expertise, partnerships of complementarity, joint actions, integrated intervention relating to vertical assignments, and integrated intervention relating to situations of autonomy.

One of the challenges associated with this broad, flexible definition of horizontality lies in clearly differentiating this concept from other forms of cooperation that have been characterized by social science. One example that comes readily to mind is governance, which, like horizontality, is a concept applied to understanding the space of collaboration between the public, private and third sectors (Theys, 2003); another example is collaboration between public actors at multiple levels (“multi-level governance”) (Hooghe and Marks, 2001).

Nevertheless, there is one difference which, however slight it may be, can provide a basis for distinguishing research on horizontality – namely, that of focusing primarily on the various actors within a bureaucracy and their interrelationships. From this perspective, horizontality research could be viewed as an important complement to the study of governance, which oftentimes focuses more on relationships between public actors (as a whole) and private actors.

The analysis of Bourgault and Lapierre (2000) brought out the benefits and difficulties of the horizontal management approach. On the positive side, they note, among other things, an increase in efficiency through synergy; cost sharing and complementarity; increased efficiency through more complete analyses and the reduction of mutual neutralization conflicts; legitimization of the public image among citizens; and increased employee motivation.

On the negative side, these authors note that horizontal management by no means constitutes a universal remedy. Two of the stumbling blocks this approach is likely to encounter include having to make headway against the currently entrenched sectoral (or vertical) model and contending

## HORIZONTALITY

with the opposition occurring between the interests it strives to bring together. Bakvis and Juillet (2004) have also stressed the considerable time and effort required by horizontal management. For any horizontal approach to succeed, it takes the firm commitment of participants, including those actors at the top of the hierarchy. Notwithstanding the enthusiasm with which horizontality has been greeted in reform-minded circles, this concept continues to be difficult to translate into practice.

### Bibliography

- Bakvis, H. and L. Juillet (2004). *The Horizontal Challenge: Line Departments, Central Agencies and Leadership*, Ottawa, Canada School of Public Service.
- Bourgault, J. (2002). *Horizontalité et gestion publique: questions, aperçus et exemples*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Bourgault, J. and R. Lapierre (2000). *Horizontality and Public Management*, Ottawa, Canadian Centre for Management Development.
- Hooghe, L. and G. Marks (2001). *Multi-Level Governance and European Integration*, Lanham, Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield.
- Sproule-Jones, M. (2000). "Horizontal Management: Implementing Programs Across Interdependent Organizations," *Canadian Public Administration*, vol. 43, no. 1, pp. 93-109.
- Theys, J. (2003). "La gouvernance entre innovation et impuissance: le cas de l'environnement," *Développement durable et territoires*, Dossier 2, Gouvernance locale et développement durable, November.

---

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| <b>REPRODUCTION</b>  | Reproduction in whole or part of the definitions contained in the <i>Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration</i> is authorized, provided the source is acknowledged.  |
| <b>HOW TO CITE</b>   | Chiasson, G. with the collaboration of V. Ntezirembo (2012). "Horizontality," in L. Côté and J.-F. Savard (eds.), <i>Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration</i> , [online], <a href="http://www.dictionnaire.enap.ca">www.dictionnaire.enap.ca</a> |
| <b>INFORMATION</b>   | For further information, please visit <a href="http://www.dictionnaire.enap.ca">www.dictionnaire.enap.ca</a>   |
| <b>LEGAL DEPOSIT</b> | Library and Archives Canada, 2012   ISBN 978-2-923008-70-7 (Online)  |