

Policy

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Author

Emmanuelle Rousseau



Government

Recognizing the Plurality of Cross-Boundary Interaction to Ensure its Efficiency



Defence & Security Foresight
Group

About the Author



Emmanuelle Rousseau is a PhD student in Political Science at the Université de Montréal. She works on contestation practices and multilateral security organizations. Her doctoral research focuses on the case of Russian everyday contestation at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

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Objective

Inform on best practices regarding the whole-of-government (WoG).¹ Because of the versatile acceptance and use of the concept of WoG, its implementation should be nuanced, and context driven. WoG – if wrongly implemented – can be counterproductive. This memo presents the areas of ambiguity tied to the concept of WoG, and proposes to embrace the plurality of understandings and clarify the approach on a case-to-case basis. This way, operations can increase efficiency by improving communications, managing expectations, and allocating resources more effectively.

Summary

In the literature and in practice, the concept of WoG fragmented, unclear, and politicized. The construction of a single unified framework of understanding would not allow for its effective implementation. Instead, this memo argues that practitioners who envision deploying a WoG approach should establish the meaning, expectations, and implication of the interactions beforehand, taking into account the context and the different actors and levels of contact present. This way, it will be possible to establish criteria to evaluate the success of WoG operations.

Background

DND is involved in several cross-boundary interaction projects with other Canadian or foreign actors. For instance, the departmental plan refers to the concept of Whole-of-Government regarding the Arctic and Northern Policy Framework, the CAF Joint Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance, Operation IMPACT in Syria, and various peace operations more generally. It can be broadly defined as “cross-boundary (inter- and intra-departmental) interaction amongst public sector and military actors (individual, teams, and organizational units) tasked with working on complex, cross-cutting issues related to peace, security, instability, and fragility” (Baechler 2020:7).

In Canadian Foreign and Defence policies this concept has been referred to as a “comprehensive approach,” 3D, WoG, or Civil Military coordination (CIMIC). *Strong, Secure and Engaged* presents cross-boundary interactions as a key principle of DND operations, recognizing the existence of a security-development nexus that requires humanitarian, diplomatic, and security actors to share spaces and operations.

Analysis

The analysis of the concept of WoG shows that it has developed under various names and acceptations across policy and research fields. When implementing a WoG policy, practitioners should clarify its meaning and the expectations of the various involved actors, rather than try to form a universal definition of the concept. Concrete measurements of WoG efficacy can circumvent the lack of universal implementation strategy.

¹In this memo, the acronym WoG is used in lieu of all concepts of cross-boundary interaction to make it more readable.

1. *There is no universal acceptance of the concept of Whole-of-Government.*

- > Scholars and practitioners both refer to cross-boundary interaction through an array of denominations that can be equivalent – the 3D approach was replaced by the WoG – or be specific to some fields like civ-mil cooperation.
- > The meaning of WoG varies across communities:
 - > It always implies a form of interaction, but its degree and depth are unclear. For instance, the difference in meaning between coordination and collaboration is not universally shared.
 - > This fragmentation rests partially on disciplinary or bureaucratic culture. The fractures in the understanding of WoG can reinforce compartmentalization, for example between international security and development. On the ground, this can result, for instance, in misperceptions of civil-military cooperation by both sides.
- > The lack of common acceptance of WoG fosters tensions:
 - > The implementation of WoG approaches can lead to the reinforcement of organizational boundaries and cause actors to protect their organizational raison d'être and bureaucratic space.
 - > Studies of its use show that WoG is politicized and changes in the term often reflect political rather than conceptual changes. For instance, in Canada, despite the semantic shift from 3D to WoG which took place when Stephen Harper took office, the substance of the term remained identical in practice.

In the absence of a common definition, there is a risk of semantic- and typology-inflation, that would in turn increase the need of a common understanding, while making it even harder to evaluate the efficiency of the concept and its implementation over time.

2. *There should not be a universal understanding of WoG.*

- > The assessment provided supra does not call for the establishment of a universal definition of WoG. A one-size-fits-all approach would be counterproductive:
 - > The WoG approach is context dependent. In each case, the accepted meaning adopted by practitioners should be based on the most salient and relevant attributes of WoG. This case-to-case approach allows for efficient mobilization of human and material resources.
 - > The establishment of a single definition would answer calls for clarification, but make WoG inapplicable in practice. It would reinforce the politicization of the concept and turn it into an empty vessel.
- > Past experiences and research point to a need for within-case coherence, not coherence across cases:
 - > Studies in Public Administration conceptualize WoG as a complex system with different levels of interaction and different actors interconnected. Context, administration environment, and decision-process can vary at each node.
 - > A single definition cannot capture this ad hoc complexity.

3. A systematic clarification prior to its implementation can help ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of cross-boundary approaches.

- > Research shows that tensions among partners arise when contributions and roles are not clearly defined:
 - > This is especially underscored regarding cultural differences between military, development, and humanitarian actors.
 - > Lack of clarity can lead to turf wars, especially when organizations are similar and/or compete for resources from the same budget.
- > Consequently, early on, practitioners need to establish the depth, levels, and actors expected to interact.
 - > It clarifies the needs and relevance of WoG in each context, WoG is not a panacea, and is financially and logistically resource consuming.
 - > As attributes of WoG depend on the context, the clarification of expectation is important in order to evaluate the efficiency of interactions.
 - > Conversely, there is no universally applicable best practice. Feedback is context-dependent but can be compared to the interaction framework established at the beginning.

Recommendation(s)

Before implementing cross-boundary interaction on the ground, its meaning in context needs to be clearly defined. A framework encompassing the different levels, frequency, and depth of interaction should be agreed on at the beginning of the implementation process. Over time, the framework should be used to evaluate the success of WoG in this case, and to identify areas of improvement.

Conclusion

Research and practitioner feedback underscore the versatility of WoG. This makes the concept vulnerable to politicization and co-optation as an empty vessel. To ensure a more efficient and relevant implementation of cross-boundary interaction, DND should identify areas that lack clarity in WoG, and establish a practice of setting a clear interaction framework at the beginning of each mission.