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Angèle Bilodeau, Isabelle Laurin, Carole Clavier, Fabien Rose et Louise Potvin

De Boeck Supérieur | « Journal of Innovation Economics & Management »

2019/3 n° 30 | pages 163 à 190

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-journal-of-innovation-economics-2019-3-page-163.htm>

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Multi-Level Issues in Intersectoral Governance of Public Action: Insights from the Field of Early Childhood in Montreal (Canada)¹

Angèle BILODEAU

*École de santé publique de
l'Université de Montréal (Canada)*
angele.bilodeau@umontreal.ca

Isabelle LAURIN

*Direction régionale de santé publique de Montréal
École de santé publique de
l'Université de Montréal (Canada)*
isabelle.laurin.ccsmtl@ssss.gouv.qc.ca

Carole CLAVIER

*Département de science politique de
l'Université du Québec à Montréal (Canada)*
clavier.carole@uqam.ca

Fabien ROSE

*Centre de recherche Léa-Roback sur
les inégalités sociales de santé de Montréal (Canada)*
fab.rose@gmail.com

1. *Funding:* This research was funded jointly by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) 2011–2016 [ROH115211] and the ARIMA Team funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) – Partnership Grant [895-2011-1008], at *InterActions – Centre de recherche et de partage des savoirs, CIUSSS du Nord-de-l'Île-de-Montréal*. The preparation of this article has also benefited from the financial support of the ARIMA Team.

Acknowledgements: The authors thank their research partners at regional and local community levels for their generous contribution. They also wish to express their thanks to Patrick Riley for translating and proofreading this article.

Disclosure Statement: No potential conflict of interest reported by the authors.

Louise POTVIN

*École de santé publique de
l'Université de Montréal (Canada)*
louise.potvin@umontreal.ca

ABSTRACT

Putting societal issues on the agenda of public action calls for advanced forms of collaboration between sectors and levels of governance. However, action systems have multiple silos, both horizontal and vertical, that impede collaboration. Therefore, clarifying the challenges of intersectoral and multi-level governance becomes highly relevant. Based on the three-I approach, a study of early childhood programs in Montreal highlights these issues. The study identifies various sectoral mechanisms and rules at the provincial level that hinder innovation in regional and local intersectoral action systems. Compartmentalized accountability by program appears to be the most constraining rule in favour of the status quo. The study illustrates how the local level can be both the place for reproducing sectorization and the ideal place for intersectoral coordination.

KEYWORDS: Intersectoral Governance, Multi-Level Governance, Intersectoral Coordination, Three-I Approach, Integrated Policies

JEL CODES: I18

Putting societal issues, such as the reduction of social inequalities in health, on the agenda of public action calls for advanced forms of collaboration between different sectors and different levels of governance. These collaborations are necessary to develop and deploy interventions to address the complexity of such wicked problems (Chircop *et al.*, 2015; Head, Alford, 2013; Lascoumes, 1996; Varone *et al.*, 2013). However, these collaborations are confronted by systems with multiple silos, characterized by interests that are seldom aligned, inconsistent action, and decision-making processes that are not conducive to collaboratively addressing complex issues (Bureau, 2014; Grenier, Denis, 2018). In this context, shedding light on the challenges of intersectoral and multi-level governance becomes highly relevant (Duit, Galaz, 2008; McQueen *et al.*, 2012; O'Leary, Vij, 2012). This article studies intersectoral coordination between three levels of governance of five support programs for concerted local action to reduce social inequalities in children's health in Montreal (Quebec, Canada). Our aim is to identify the converging and competing interests at stake and what impedes the coordination or integration of public policies and programs at higher levels of governance.

Policy sectors – and the sectorization process – have structured modern states. That refers to the specialization and compartmentalization of public action in areas of specific knowledge, institutions and interests, structured and propped up by planned, authorized and financed administrative processes, techniques and procedures. This process divides civil society, market, as well as public administration, by establishing sectoral norms and financial frameworks (Degeling, 1995). Intersectoral collaborations are seen as a response to overcome barriers arising from this process and create interdependence among sectors to advance more comprehensive interventions (Chircop *et al.*, 2015). Intersectoral collaborations include areas of public administration (e.g. health, education, transportation), grand spheres of society (the public, private and voluntary worlds), and hybrid organizations, such as philanthropy, that blend private, public or civil society characteristics (Chircop *et al.*, 2015; Divay *et al.*, 2013).

These collaborations aim to harmonize existing sectoral policies and programs, or to create new, more comprehensive programs or policies to better address the complexity of wicked societal problems, such as climate change or poverty, that cannot be solved by a single sector. Scholars distinguish two degrees of collaboration (Meijers, Stead, 2004; Varone *et al.*, 2013): 1) coordination, i.e. the mutual adjustment of sectoral policies or programs that strengthen them and foster their implementation; and 2) integration, i.e. joint policies or programs put in place by different sectors that pursue objectives not covered by individual sectoral policies or programs. Integration requires more interaction, interdependence, formalization, resources and time.

The difficulties of intersectoral governance are linked to the high heterogeneity of the actors involved, of the programs run by these actors, and of the issues in which they are engaged (Figuère, Rocca, 2012; Lascoumes, 1996). In these intersectoral networks, the interplay – and competition – of sectoral, disciplinary or professional knowledge and practices, and of different perspectives on problems and solutions, raises many interlinked issues (O’Leary, Vij, 2012). Coordination or integration efforts face political or administrative obstacles such as: the layering of policies, programs, and instruments that become contradictory or inconsistent (Lascoumes, 1996; Rayner, Howlett, 2009a); the interest of sectors in establishing their own objectives and rules and in exercising control over a field of practice (Degeling, 1995; Rayner, Howlett, 2009a); power relationships between sectors and between levels of governance (O’Leary, Vij, 2012); or sectoral funding and audit systems (Lin *et al.*, 2012).

Consequently, intersectoral collaborations require the harmonization of areas of meaning and action in order to achieve better coordinated actions

or new integrated policies or programs (Burau, 2014; Lascoumes, 1996). This means that each sector must not only direct its own action towards the objectives of the integrated policy but also prioritize the overall objectives (Rayner, Howlett, 2009a). It is not easy to develop shared norms and mutually beneficial interactions since it involves finding a balance between the autonomy of sectoral actors and their interdependence within cross-sectoral networks (McGuire, Agranoff, 2011; O'Leary, Vij, 2012). It is well documented that the shift to a higher intensity of collaboration is accompanied by greater interdependence in action, but also by a loss of autonomy among actors (Meijers, Stead, 2004). On the other hand, the documented benefits are: reduction in program duplication; increased opportunities for action at different levels of determinants; increased impact potential by pooling funding and resources; and increased opportunities for sustainability (Hanleybrown *et al.*, 2012; MacLean *et al.*, 2010).

The challenges of multi-level governance of public action add to the complexity of intersectoral governance (Rayner, Howlett, 2009b). In addition to the horizontal multiplication of actors – from different sectors – in the policy process, multi-level governance raises the question of the vertical distribution of regulatory powers between levels of government (Divay *et al.*, 2013; Kazepov, 2010; Rayner, Howlett, 2009b; Varone *et al.*, 2013). How are policies and programs connected – or not – at different levels of public action, when they are deployed on a common territorial basis? Since different levels of governance have different responsibilities and resources, they do not face the same issues. Typically, in modern societies, the central state establishes strategic choices and funding, while the regional level sets shared frameworks and supports collective diagnoses and the organization of action, in support of the local level, which is responsible for concrete actions and their follow-up (Dab, 2005; Klijn *et al.*, 2010). As is the case with shifting responsibilities for social policy since the 1980s (Kazepov, 2010), the rescaling process is characterized by the constant negotiations and renegotiations of the regulatory capacities between different levels of governance. This process gives rise to a complex interweaving of regulatory powers between levels and among a wider range of multisectoral actors, including their involvement – whether in partnership with public authorities or not – in the strategic roles of designing, funding and managing social policies (Kazepov, 2010).

As soon as the interdependence of levels is at issue in the intersectoral governance of public action, strategies for change tend to target supra-local levels (Lin *et al.*, 2012; Saint-Pierre, Gauvin, 2010). First, they focus on leadership by the highest governmental authority in establishing coherent public policies (Durose, Rummery, 2006; Saint-Pierre, Gauvin, 2010) and in using

policy and governance instruments tailored to ensure the convergence of sectoral actions (Rayner, Howlett, 2009a). The purpose of these instruments is to limit some options and promote others. They can be of different types: legislative and regulatory; financial; incentive-based; informative or communicational; and based on best practices (Lascoumes, Le Galès, 2005, 2018). For instance, instruments can consist of: intersectoral funding and accountability frameworks to share financial resources and evaluate the achievement of objectives developed jointly by several sectors (Lin *et al.*, 2012; O'Leary, Vij, 2012); coordination and collaboration structures and mechanisms between sectors and between levels of governance, high up in the hierarchy, to promote a common understanding of issues, synergy and coherence of actions, and maximization of resources (Lin *et al.*, 2012; Saint-Pierre, Gauvin, 2010); strategies and instruments for knowledge transfer, communication, practice support, or collective learning to bring about changes in sectoral culture (O'Leary, Vij, 2012; Saint-Pierre, Gauvin, 2010).

Thus, the multi-level governance of intersectoral action involves specific issues and challenges that are still poorly documented in empirical research (Duit, Galaz, 2008; McQueen *et al.*, 2012). Our previous work has shown that in a multi-level governance context, intersectoral progress is mainly made at the local level, while at the higher levels, intersectoral coordination runs into significant sectoral challenges. In Montreal, the main intersectoral and multi-level challenge in early childhood development is to reduce social inequalities in health. This issue was identified as a new area for public action in Quebec through the publication, in 2008, of a survey on the school readiness of Montreal children (Laurin *et al.*, 2012). This survey portrayed the overall development of children as they enter school, to encourage intersectoral mobilization to improve services. The survey was followed by a commitment to action at all three levels of governance. Provincially, in 2009, a partnership between the Government of Quebec and a philanthropic foundation created a dedicated fund of CAD\$ 400 million over 10 years. Regionally, in Montreal, an intersectoral committee was established, including representatives of sectoral programs funding concerted local action in early childhood. Our work has shown that regional mobilization has led to the addition of sectoral initiatives requiring community-based deployment. The regional committee has primarily focused on supporting local action rather than on regional strategic challenges such as intersectoral program coordination. Locally, intersectoral committees have engaged in mobilization and supported several intersectoral innovations (Laurin *et al.*, 2015).

Our analysis of the impact of this survey on the mobilization of actors and the organization of services during 2008-2011 showed that coordination of

funding programs was one of the main controversies within the regional committee. From the perspective of regional actors, this coordination involves the autonomy of funders (governmental and philanthropic) in establishing their own requirements and accountability rules, even when program objectives and target populations are similar. From the local point of view, the main issue is the accumulation of funding programs requesting local intersectoral implementation, and its consequences on local action. Within the regional committee, this controversy was concluded by favoring the exchange of information and collaboration where possible, while respecting the autonomy of the various programs (Bilodeau *et al.*, 2018). Understanding of this multi-level governance issue was further developed in a study conducted during 2014 and 2015, on which this article reports.

The Three-I Approach to Understanding Intersectoral and Multi-Level Governance Issues

To grasp today's great challenges of the governance of public action, Lascoumes (1996) highlights the need to consider three highly interdependent parameters: mobilization systems, i.e. the alignment of interests between heterogeneous actors around public problems; the interlinking of knowledge and expertise systems from different sectors; and the achievement of greater consistency, transformation and enrichment of politics or programs, and their political-administrative and professional decision-making and management systems. The three-I approach – Ideas-Interests-Institutions – adequately captures the high degree of interdependency between these parameters (Clavier, Gagnon, 2013). First systematized by Hall (1997) and taken up by Palier and Surrel (2005), the three-I approach is seen as a classic tool to guide public action analysis. These three sets of variables allow the complexity of public action to be grasped as it is carried out in its context, with a bottom-up research perspective (Lascoumes, Le Galès, 2018). Furthermore, ideas, interests, institutions, and coordination/integration governance issues are seen as relevant variables to address the policy dynamics of exchanges between policy subsystems (Varone *et al.*, 2013).

Ideas refer to the cognitive and normative framework of public action, namely the fundamental values and belief systems of the actors, their knowledge and social representations, their diagnoses of problems and their paradigms of action in a given field. These elements are considered the most stable in the political game, although the intellectual dimension tolerates

inconsistencies to enable the aggregation of divergent interests (Palier, Surel, 2005). Identifying the construction of representations conveyed by the actors in a given field, over time, makes it possible to grasp their weight in the decision-making and public action process (Palier, Surel 2005; Surel, 2010).

Interests refer to the relevant actors in the situation under study, their logic of action, their power relations and the strategies they deploy, based on their calculation of the costs/benefits expected from conflict and cooperation (Palier, Surel, 2005). Interests and strategies have a short time frame because they develop in the interaction among actors and take on their meaning within the institutional framework in which they are constructed (Palier, Surel, 2005; Surel, 2010). Identifying interacting interests and strategies is necessary to grasp the issues and understand negotiations and trade-offs in decision-making and policy development (Palier, Surel, 2005; Surel, 2010).

Finally, institutions refer to the structures, rules, and mechanisms developed in a field over time. These frameworks have a moderate temporality, as institutionalization processes take time to complete, as do the processes of their transformation. Institutional frameworks are identified as resources and constraints that govern interactions within a policy area (Palier, Surel, 2005). The accumulation of structures, rules, and mechanisms, sometimes contradictory, is mentioned as a constraining element in the conduct of public action (Surel, 2010).

These three dimensions of analysis are interrelated. Public policy processes are shaped by both conflicts of interest and trade-offs, formulated through cognitive and normative frameworks, and structured by existing institutions. The analyst's first task is to break down the processes studied into these three components. This makes it possible to rank their respective contributions to the understanding of processes a posteriori (Palier, Surel, 2005; Surel, 2010).

The three-I approach allows the following specific questions to be formulated with regard to multi-level and intersectoral governance of public action: 1) What are the converging and competing interests at stake between the levels of governance? 2) How are these interests addressed in the relationships between levels and with what consequences for public action? 3) How can we explain the lack of intersectoral progress at higher levels of governance despite the repeated call for coordination by local actors?

Method

Study Background

To answer these questions, the field of early childhood in Montreal is appropriate since it involves several provincial² programs with regional management and local deployment. These programs originate from major government departments and public-philanthropic partnerships. They have similar aims a priori and are deployed in the same local territories. The Montreal region was chosen because the purpose was to explore issues raised by our previous work on this region. One local territory was selected from the six territories studied in our previous work. In this territory, the actors undertake concerted action from the bottom up via a local plan that they seek to implement using funding programs. This favours local coordination, which adds relevance to this territory for the study. The study covers all five provincial financial support programs for concerted local action in early childhood, deployed locally in the Montreal region during 2014 and 2015, namely: the program *Services intégrés en périnatalité et pour la petite enfance – volet Soutien à la création d’environnements favorables à la santé et au bien-être*³ (SIPPE-SCEF); the *Programme d’aide à l’éveil à la lecture et à l’écriture*⁴ (PAÉLÉ); *Québec en forme*; *Avenir d’enfants*; and *Réunir-Réussir*. Formal ethical approval was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee of the University of Montreal (# 15-115 CERES-D) and from the Research Ethics Committee of the Montreal Directorate of Public Health (#320).

Data Collection

The variables under study are derived from the three-I approach. We operationalized the concept of idea as the frames of reference guiding the reduction of child health inequalities in each program. The concept of institution refers to the structures, implementation and operating rules of each program. Finally, the concept of interest refers to the costs and benefits associated with multi-level and intersectoral collaborations from each actor’s perspective.

Data sources are specific to each level. At the provincial level, we collected public program documents (n=25): six reference frameworks, seven studies, eight annual reports, one brief, one conference, one television report,

2. Canada has two levels of government, each with its own jurisdictions, the federal government and the provincial and territorial governments. The areas discussed in this study fall under provincial jurisdiction.

3. Integrated perinatal and early childhood services – Support for the creation of environments that promote health and wellbeing.

4. Reading and writing early awareness program.

one book about an event (list available in Appendix 1). At the regional level, the data were: (i) a group interview (2h30) conducted in November 2015 with the regional representatives of the five programs (n=8) and the regional grouping of mandated community organizations (n=1); (ii) interview notes (n=4) conducted between April 2014 and April 2015 with two regional actors who held key roles in the Montreal early childhood field; (iii) direct observation notes of regional events (n=3) during the same period; (iv) public documents (n=8): two reference frameworks, four studies, two reports (list available in Appendix 1); (v) internal documents (n=4): one portrait, one reference framework, one report, and one meeting minutes. At the local level, data were collected from January 2014 to September 2015: (i) direct observation notes from meetings of the local early childhood committee (n=18), meetings of three other local committees (n=6) and local events (n=2); (ii) minutes of these meetings (n=23); (iii) notes of interviews with key actors from the local early childhood committee and other organizations from the territory under study (n=21); and (iv) ephemera (emails, meeting agenda). A database was created using relevant excerpts from the sources, coded according to the variables under study. The validity of the data collected was verified by triangulation of sources.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was carried out in three stages. (1) A comparative portrait of the five provincial programs was drawn up. (2) The study of the local territory was carried out. The data were organized under three headings: actors of the local early childhood committee; program requirements, consequences and interests raised by their compartmentalization; and local coordination efforts. The highlights were validated by the local committee's co-coordinator without requiring significant adjustments. (3) Local results were shared with regional participants to the group interview. They confirmed that, to varying degrees and in one aspect or another, these results reflected the reality of the various local territories in Montreal. The documentary and interview data with regional actors were processed by program and organized under three headings: their comments after being briefed on the results of the local study; their views on the advantages and disadvantages of current functioning; the opportunities and obstacles to regional program coordination and efforts to that end at the local, regional, and provincial levels.

Results

The results are presented in three parts. The first part presents and compares the founding ideas and institutional frames of the five programs in order to highlight their similarities and differences, which form the basis of the interests at stake in their coordination. The second part answers the first research question by presenting local, regional, and provincial interests at stake in multi-level governance. The third part answers the second research question by presenting how these interests were addressed at the three levels of governance.

Founding ideas and institutional frames of the five programs

The five programs are under the responsibility of four Government of Quebec ministries; three of them are the result of partnerships established separately between the Government of Quebec and the private philanthropic foundation L&A Chagnon. Their responsibilities overlap since they were created over time without being coordinated, neither within a single ministry, nor between ministries, nor between public-philanthropic partnerships (PPPs) (Table 1). Box 1 sets out their respective missions.

Table 1 – Five provincial funding programs supporting concerted local action in early childhood

MODE OF GOVERNANCE	MINISTRIES			
	Health and social services	Family	Education	Secretariat for Youth*
Government only	SIPPE-SCEF 0-5 years [£] since 2004 [§]		PAÉLÉ 0-5 years [£] since 2003 [§]	
Public-philanthropic partnership	Québec en forme 0-17 years [£] 2002-2019 [§]	Avenir d'enfants 0-5 years [£] 2009-2019 [§]		Réunir-Réussir 0-20 years [£] 2009-2015 [§]

Key:

*The *Secrétariat à la Jeunesse* [Secretariat for Youth] reports to the *Ministère du Conseil Exécutif*.

[£]Target population.

[§] Date of inception and ending – if applicable.

Three elements characterize these programs:

1) A similarity of content – Ideas. All five programs identify early childhood as a critical age for human development and focus on early intervention. They all adopt an ecosystem approach by establishing that actions must be

Box 1 – Founding ideas of the five programs supporting concerted local action in early childhood

SIPPE-SCEF

Creation of environments conducive to the optimal development of children aged 0-5 living in disadvantaged areas, and implementation of family life projects, based on the empowerment of individuals and communities.

PAÉLÉ

Incorporation of early reading and writing activities in places and services frequented by children aged 0-5 years and their families in disadvantaged areas.

Québec en forme

Mobilization of individuals and society to promote the adoption and maintenance of a physically active lifestyle and healthy eating among young people aged 0-17.

Avenir d'enfants

Support for the mobilization of local communities to achieve the overall development of children aged 0-5 living in poverty.

Réunir-Réussir

Support for initiatives to mobilize regional authorities and local communities to promote student retention in disadvantaged areas. School readiness for children aged 0-5 years is considered a key factor in school retention.

part of the local community's micro system, i.e. local accessibility to resources and services for families experiencing poverty. All of them target specific factors on which to act according to their respective missions (see Box 1).

The two programs with the most funding, namely *SIPPE-SCEF*, already in place in 2004, and *Avenir d'enfants*, created in 2009 from the new PPP fund, are the most closely related in terms of their mission and strategies for action. When it was created, *Avenir d'enfants* was based on the same elements as *SIPPE-SCEF*.

2) Similarities in implementation rules – Institutional frames. Concerted local planning is a funding requirement for each program. Each program also requires a separate accountability report to funders. Support staff in each program is made available to local committees to help with planning. The common feature of the programs is funding for specific projects rather than for the overall mission of the funded community organizations. The participation of local organizations in the local early childhood committees is a prerequisite for access to funding.

Although they have a comparable level of requirements, these programs represent a very variable financial contribution to local territories. In the local area studied, in 2014-2015, financial support for the five programs totalled CAD\$ 643,500, of which 54% came from *Avenir d'enfants*, 25% from *SIPPE-SCEF*, 16% from *Québec en forme*, and the remaining 5% in almost equal parts from *Réunir-Réussir* and *PAÉLÉ*.

3) Differences in operating rules – Institutional frames. Planning, reporting and evaluation requirements are different and specific to each program. They are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2 – Planning, accountability, and evaluation arrangements for the five funding programs

Programs	Planning	Accountability	Evaluation
SIPPE-SCEF	No format specified. Provincial reference framework and regional guide on eligible priorities, target populations, projects, and expenses.	Annual and triennial financial and activity reports. No format specified.	Recommended. No dedicated funding. No format specified.
PAÉLÉ	Designated format and steps, vocabulary and tools. List of protective factors provided for planning.	Annual, financial and activity reports. Designated tools.	Recommended. No dedicated funding. No format specified.
Québec en forme	Designated format and steps, vocabulary and tools. Compliance with specific criteria.	Periodic and annual financial and activity reports. Designated computer-based tools.	Recommended. Funding available on request during the planning stage.
Avenir d'enfants	Designated 5-step format, vocabulary and tools. List of protective factors provided for planning. Training available.	Periodic and annual financial and activity reports. Designated computer-based tools.	7% of the locally allocated budget dedicated to external evaluation consultants. Tools provided.
Réunir-Réussir	Designated format and steps, vocabulary and tools.	Milestone reports – indicator monitoring. Designated tools.	Recommended. Funding available.

Interests at Stake at the Three Levels of Governance

The cognitive and institutional frameworks of the programs raise different, often competing interests, at the three levels of governance.

Local Interests at Stake

The local actors of the area under study had a strong interest in local collaboration. They saw it as a valuable setting for networking, collective discussion, sharing of information and references, mobilization around common objectives and projects, concerted bottom-up planning, and consistency in actions carried out in the area. The stacking of funding programs with their different implementation and operating rules raises competing interests that affect this dynamic of collaboration. Table 3 presents these interests at stake.

Table 3 – Implementation and operating rules of the five programs, and interests associated with them by the local early childhood committee

Implementation and operating rules of programs	Local actors' interests at stake
Addition of compartmentalized programs. Concerted local planning by program. Separate accountability.	Addition of local collaboration structures. Increased planning and accountability operations. Increased workload dedicated to funding, program coordination, and funds management. Focus on the planning function and weakening of the local committee.
Models and planning tools designated by program.	Emphasis on program parameters over local response to local needs.
Assistance with support staff per program.	Transformation of the collaborative dynamic within the local committee: Transfer of key roles and competencies to these external staff. Reduced control of local actors over the decision-making process. Loss of influence of member organizations.
Funding by project. Compulsory participation in local committee to access funding.	Positioning community organizations as program delivery agents rather than partners in local collaboration. Creation of a sense of competition between members seeking funding.

The overlapping of programs, each with their different rules, increases the workload of local actors in obtaining and managing funding, to the detriment of achieving their mission. The focus on the planning function weakens the

local committee due to the desertion of members not directly concerned by the plan linked to specific funding. The obligation to plan under program frameworks implies that these parameters take precedence over the local committee's perspective on meeting the needs of its community.

Funders and their regional representatives supply the local early childhood committees with support staff to contribute towards the planning workload. However, in the territory under study, through this support staff, funders and their regional representatives exert influence within the local committee. These agents play key roles, such as structuring internal operations and planning action. In doing so, they relieve committee members of the administrative tasks of collaboration. As a result, these agents, who are not members of the local committee, are transforming the dynamics of collaboration by: 1) appropriating key roles and competencies; 2) reducing the control of local actors over the decision-making process and causing their loss of influence within the local committee, in favour of these agents.

Finally, project-based funding, rather than funding for the mission of community organizations, affects their autonomy by positioning them as program delivery agents rather than partners in local action. Participation in the local committee as a condition for funding creates a competitive climate among members seeking funding, reducing their ability to fully participate in concerted local action.

Regional and Provincial Interests at Stake

Compartmentalization of programs is part of the sectorized institutional culture of government action. It represents a way for actors at higher levels of governance to promote their interests and fulfil their mission locally. Table 4 presents the interests at stake.

Table 4 - Implementation and operating rules of the programs, and regional and provincial interests associated with them by Montreal's regional actors

Implementation and operating rules of programs	Actors' interests at stake	
	Provincial level	Regional level
Guidelines and rules for planning and accountability for each program defined at the provincial level.	Accountability of each ministry and PPP for the management of public funds. Ensure the soundness of control rules at the regional and local levels.	Requirements to account for the use of funds to ministries and PPPs. Relay the requirements to local actors.

Statement of problems/solutions specific to each program and conviction of the validity of its vision.	Demonstrate the isolated impact of each program.	
Domination of the sectorized institutional culture over decompartmentalization initiatives.	Ensure that each ministry and PPP have control over program governance and direction.	Support local coordination initiatives. Demonstrate their decision-making capacity and ability to innovate and transform the situation.

The funding of programs – with their guidelines and operating rules – is allocated at the provincial level. Regional program representatives are accountable to each ministry and PPP for the use of funds. Their main challenge is to effectively relay the requirements of the programs to local actors. The ability of ministries and PPPs to ensure the soundness of control rules at regional and local levels is, according to regional respondents, an important provincial issue. This soundness depends on the priority given to consistency among the regions of Quebec over regional adaptation, giving added value to the status quo.

Although the programs' objectives are strongly related, each one claims to support its own problematization and is convinced of the validity of its vision. This raises the challenge for ministries and PPPs, as well as their regional representatives, to demonstrate the isolated impact of their programs. Thus, when PPP programs were created, the philanthropic partner argued that they should have more impact than regular government programs.

Finally, the dominance of a highly sectorized institutional culture in the ministries, and consequently in their philanthropic partners, means that regional representatives do not anticipate any initiatives to decompartmentalize programs at the provincial level, such as integrating funds or developing common planning and reporting tools. The interest at stake when considering potential changes is the control of ministries and PPPs over governance and program direction, which refers to the power relationships between these funders – large and small, public or PPP – and among their regional representatives. In this context, the immediate challenge for regional representatives is to succeed in providing relevant support for local program coordination initiatives by negotiating innovative local arrangements that mitigate the effects of sectorization. This may demonstrate their regional decision-making capacity and their ability to transform the situation.

Addressing Interests at Stake at the Three Levels of Governance

At the provincial level, the documentary sources show that, starting in 2013, exchanges took place between the L&A Chagnon Foundation and the Government on the possibilities of program coordination or integration, in response to the needs expressed by local communities. However, these preliminary exchanges did not produce any tangible results. Discussions were also held among the three PPP funds on coordination possibilities. This resulted in linkages that slightly alleviated the administrative tasks of local committees, namely harmonization of the filing dates of the *Avenir d'enfants* and *Québec en forme* plans, along with the possibility of linked planning and evaluation.

At the regional level, program representatives do not have a shared understanding of the realities, needs and priorities of local communities, which they attribute to the limited information sharing among themselves and with local actor networks. As a result, they do not have the necessary information to exercise informed regional leadership in terms of collective diagnosis, shared work environment, and support for the organization of action. Faced with local expectations for more regional coordination, some argue that the decisive point would be for them to be convinced that this is an important problem to which they can find solutions. Given the constraints at the provincial level, particularly separate accountability by program, some argue that the regional level has very little room to manoeuvre and that coordination efforts are left to the local level. Others argue that, like local initiatives that have successfully reconciled the requirements of different programs, the regional level could move towards solutions. However, this issue has never been part of the regional committee's mandate.

In this context, regional program representatives are engaged in a support role for local program coordination. *Avenir d'enfants* offers its framework as a tool for integrated neighbourhood planning. However, according to several regional actors, local networks remain critical of the idea of joint planning for all programs if it were to be done within the framework of *Avenir d'enfants*. This approach is considered to be the most prescriptive and could become a necessary step for access to all public funding in the field of early childhood. *SIPPE-SCEF* recommends moving towards a single local structure or, at the very least, integrating the program into existing collaborative structures and producing a single action plan integrating all early childhood actions from all programs; however, a specific financial and activity report is required.

In practice, only unique arrangements between a local committee and more than one regional program representative have been negotiated, such

as: 1) harmonizing planning schedules between programs; 2) using a single support staff combining on-the-ground coordination of two or more programs; 3) producing integrated local planning for two or more programs. The decision-making capacity and innovative ability of regional actors are thus exercised in bilateral arrangements of this kind, initiated by local committees. The representatives of *Avenir d'enfants* and *Réunir-Réussir* assert that such linkages are possible when: 1) the people in leadership positions are willing to think outside the box; in this respect, non-governmental actors could have more latitude in decision-making; 2) these initiatives are carried out by networks of local actors. According to regional program representatives, in local territories that have a single early childhood committee, the *Avenir d'enfants* ecosystem approach has provided considerable support for the integrated planning of *Avenir d'enfants*, *Québec en forme* and *Réunir-Réussir*. In local territories whose leaders are able to assert their position and establish a relationship of empowerment and cooperation with regional actors, the negotiations have led to arrangements that they have found satisfactory. From the representative's point of view of the regional grouping of mandated community organizations, this is the case only for a minority of local territories. According to regional actors, the diversity of coordination arrangements in Montreal's local territories reflects a certain amount of local flexibility. However, given limited funding, local committees are often faced with the choice of maintaining community organizations that already provide services or funding new collective projects based on collaborative local planning. In the long run, this leads local actors to question the usefulness of an extensive planning exercise.

Thus, despite efforts observed at the provincial and regional levels, the initiative for program coordination remains at the local level. This adds to the burden of local planning without being able to count on the leverage and integrated planning tools that a proactive regional or provincial coordination approach would provide.

Discussion

Research results provide answers to the third initial question asked: How can we explain the lack of intersectoral progress at higher levels of governance, despite the repeated call for coordination by local actors? We synthesize results in such a way as to answer this question, then we discuss these results in reference to the academic literature.

In the situation studied, sectoral policies or programs seek to address the same global challenge – reducing social inequalities in child health – without

adopting the spirit of coordinated or integrated policies or programs. The system of action becomes more complex in a way that is not commensurate with the complexity of the problem to be solved. The delegation of public service provision – through the creation of PPPs – and the addition of new sectoral programs, all focused on the same solution of accessibility to resources and services at the local level, do not constitute a re-problematization of the issue as a new field of public action, for example, by engaging the different systemic levels. Rather, the multiplication of actors – from different sectors – and the sectorization of action are part of the growing complexity of the societal response to the challenge of reducing social inequalities in child health.

The three-I approach allowed us to show that ideas were not really at stake in the situation studied, since none of the actors at any level of governance discussed which societal response could best address the problem. The main contribution of this research is to highlight the many institutional ways through which actors at the mid and higher levels of governance reproduce sectorization. The lack of intersectoral progress at higher levels of governance, despite the repeated call by local actors, is mainly due to institutional constraints that determine power relationships between levels and which favour the status quo.

First, sectorization is a strongly rooted structural dimension in the central apparatus of public administration (Grenier, Denis, 2018). In the situation studied, it has been transposed into public-philanthropic partnerships to which the government has delegated the provision of public services. Its key mechanisms have been relayed at the local level by regional actors. Program-based accountability at the central level appears to be the strongest historical institutional constraint favouring the status quo (Le Bas, 2018). The legitimacy of this rule lies in the accountability of elected governments for the management of public funds. It includes control mechanisms to ensure its strength and strongly regulate regional-local interactions. In the situation studied, the programs had been institutionalized at the provincial level at different times. The interests of regional and local actors for the most part represent their current positioning in relation to parameters already given. The weight of these layered frameworks limits the scope for innovation in regional and local intersectoral governance. Local committees are caught in a combination of resources and constraints that determine the power relationships they can establish with regional program representatives. The power relationship is asymmetrical, at two levels (local and regional-provincial), to the detriment of the local level. The weight of stacked programs is detrimental to local concertation, and program frameworks limit the ability of local committees to develop a response that is adapted to the needs of local

populations. And, ultimately, for local actors, their immediate access to funding also depends on maintaining the status quo.

Second, this study empirically illustrates various strategies for replicating sectoral rules deployed for local actors, such as planning frameworks by program, support staff, and specific reporting procedures. Various adaptation strategies are driven by local interests, such as harmonization of schedules or planning models. They succeed in mitigating some of the negative effects but do not alter the fundamental institutional rules of sectorization. Indeed, over time, it becomes more and more costly to reverse past institutional rules. To do so involves considerable investment in political capital, learning and coordination, making it often seems preferable to adapt existing institutions rather than replace them (Palier, Surel, 2005). Innovations then result from the renegotiation of a few rules or the addition of new rules without altering existing ones, relying on the ability of these changes to gradually transform the entire system (Thelen, 2003). In the situation studied, no institutional coordination mechanism capable of significantly modifying the problems experienced locally has originated at the provincial level. The program coordination approach, which is based primarily on the capacity of local authorities to innovate, to which regional actors respond, results in variable and potentially inequitable treatment from one community to another, depending on the attributes of local actor networks. While the potential costs of reformulating past rules would have fallen mainly on the higher levels of governance, the real costs of sectorized operations fall mainly on the local level. In addition, the local level bears the brunt of innovation since the initiative for local coordination arrangements is also at this level.

These results empirically illustrate and reaffirm the scientific evidence that coordination efforts can be mobilized to address the cumulative inconsistencies and counterproductive aspects of sectoral policy and program development (Lascoumes, 1996; Rayner, Howlett, 2009a). But successive layers of policy elements, within institutions and at higher levels of governance, produce actors with an interest in defending the status quo (Rayner, Howlett, 2009b; Pierson, 2000). The layering of several programs calling for intersectoral collaboration was not sufficient to create institutional change in this case (Mahoney, Thelen, 2010). The complexity of these systems and the interests involved mean that remedial strategies are only really implemented when there is a high degree of dissatisfaction (Rayner, Howlett, 2009b). However, in the situation studied, given the respective responsibilities of the three levels, the demand for change really came only from the local level, directly confronted with the needs of the populations.

To achieve progress in policy and program coordination or integration, the scientific literature argues that a combination of vertical and horizontal strategies is needed at higher levels of governance (Bouckaert *et al.*, 2010; Burau, 2014; Keast *et al.*, 2006). Horizontal governance – as can be exercised at the regional level – has limited capacity without a head organization to provide leadership (Lin *et al.*, 2012; Saint-Pierre, Gauvin, 2010). This regional leadership must be coupled with coordination between levels based on authority and government legitimacy (Burau, 2014). At the local level, for networks of actors to become spaces for innovation and influence at higher levels, there must not be too much rigidity in frameworks and constraints in operations, and they must have sufficient room for decision-making (Grenier, Denis, 2018). In the situation studied, the public authority is split between four ministries and delegated to public-philanthropic partnerships. The institutional rules of ministries, juxtaposed with those of private philanthropy, complicate governance at higher levels and the renewal of multi-level relationships. As a result, the local level becomes both the primary locus for intersectoral coordination and the locus for the exercise of mechanisms replicating sectorization.

Conclusion

The ability of the various levels of public action to respond to the complexity of emerging issues is undermined by the perpetuation of operations across multiple partitions, horizontal and vertical. The change in approach challenges higher levels of governance to adopt strong integrative strategies such as legitimate and effective network heads, pooling of financial resources, common action plans, and joint evaluation of results (Saint-Pierre, Gauvin, 2010; Lin *et al.*, 2012; O'Leary, Vij, 2012). Integrative initiatives that include such attributes (e.g., Big Local or Collective Impact⁵) merit research attention. It is important to document whether, to what extent, and how these initiatives are succeeding in changing the sectoral policy paradigms and competing interests at stake, and in influencing the structural constraints of sectorization.

5. See for Big Local: <http://localtrust.org.uk/>; for Collective Impact: https://ssir.org/pdf/Channeling_Change_PDF.pdf; https://ssir.org/pdf/Channeling_Change_PDF.pdf

Strengths and Limitations

The main strength of this study is to document the coordination of provincial programs – or lack thereof – from the local level, where they touch the ground, up to the regional level, which can act as a relay for local needs or government wishes, to the provincial level from which the programs originate. This made it possible to question the higher levels on the basis of local issues of intersectoral multi-level governance. One limitation of the study is having to document the provincial level based on documentary sources only. The limited progress observed locally and regionally in terms of provincial coordination explains this choice. The risk that researchers face in studying complex situations such as this one is that part of the reality may be missed because they have not employed strategies to capture all the aspects and interactions at play.

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Appendix 1 – Data sources: public documents at the national and regional levels

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