

The search for more effective methods of delivering public services has been a fixture of public management for several decades. Overall, the trend in both Europe and North America has been toward reducing the service delivery role of the government in certain areas of activity and encouraging the private or nonprofit sectors to play a more important role. In the last decade, governments in both industrialized and developing countries have sought to deliver public services through new working relationships among governments or between government and the private and nonprofit sectors. These public service delivery innovations are shifting to more equal partnership models enabled by interorganizational collaboration and the use of advanced information technology (IT) (Prefontaine, et al., 2001). The focus on government reform and re-engineering has coincided with the emergence of new technologies, and together these trends have encouraged a tighter coupling of work processes and information flows across organizational, jurisdictional, and sectoral boundaries.

During the 1990s in the US, the National Performance Review (NPR) urged government agencies to “re-engineer government activities, making full use of computer systems and telecommunications to revolutionize how we deliver services” (NPR, 1993, p. V). In response, government agencies often turned to the private sector for the IT expertise needed to implement more efficient public service delivery systems.

In Canada, growing attention to e-government generated “government on-line” priorities in the late 1990s including (1) organization of government information and services by user needs instead of government structures; (2) on-line availability of government information and forms; and (3) provision of transactional services through secure networks (Government of Canada, 1999). The first priority requires government agencies to collaborate in order to provide integrated services that better respond to citizen and business needs (Government of Canada, 2002). To achieve this goal, Canadian federal agencies and provinces have begun to experiment broadly with new interorganizational relationships within government and between government and private and nonprofit organizations.

The European Council has made pan-European e-government initiatives a top priority for improving the delivery of public services to EU citizens and businesses. The stated goal of the “eEurope initiative,” is to provide interactive government services throughout the European Union. Interoperability is sought within and between public agencies at the European, national, regional, and local levels; as well as with the private sector. (European Commission, 2003).

All of these approaches are illustrations of a phenomenon that Milward and Provan (2000) call the “hollow state,” in which government provides the framework of authority for public services, but delegates or shares implementation responsibility with other sectors in society. Often these arrangements depend on innovative multi-organizational collaborations. These organizational forms have been extensively studied under the rubrics of interorganizational networks and interorganizational relations (or IOR). IOR has a long tradition in sociology, (stimulated especially by the early work of Granovetter, 1973; Van de Ven, 1976 and Hall, et al., 1977), economics (e.g. Williamson, 1996) and strategic management (e.g., Jarillo, 1988; Koza & Lewin, 1988). Since the 1980s, the emphasis of IOR research has shifted from a focus on understanding interorganizational conflict (Aldrich, 1971) to the prospects for interorganizational collaboration (Distefano, 1984; Gray, 1989). Consequently, IOR has been of increasing interest to scholars and practitioners of public management (e.g., Weiss, 1987; McCaffrey, et al., 1995; Faerman, et al., 2001) seeking to improve understanding of the nature, benefits, and risks of these emerging organizational forms (Provan & Milward, 2001, Agranoff & McGuire, 2001). This study is an attempt to test empirically the salience and relationships among IOR concepts in operational e-government initiatives in an international setting.

Research on interorganizational relations addresses a wide variety of concepts and concerns. Key among them are environmental and structural conditions that stimulate and shape IORs (Hall, et.al, 1977; Gray, 1985; Oliver, 1990; Burt, 1992), motivations for entering into such relationships (Schermerhorn, 1975; Oliver, 1990), the processes of IOR formation and operation (Van de Ven, 1976; Vand de Ven & Walker, 1984; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994; Doz, 1996; Gulati, 1998), the structures of IORs (Granovetter, 1973; Powell, 1990; Gulati, 1995), and their performance (Provan & Milward, 1995; Gulati, 1998; Koza & Lewin, 1999). Each of these areas is elaborated in the section below.