



A Centre of Government Fit for the Time: Acting as One,
Serving as One, Learning as One

Working Paper

NS is an International Co-operation Project led by: The Honourable Jocelyne Bourgon P.C., O.C.



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Introduction – What is the Center of Government (CoG)?

With a rise in the cross-cutting and ‘wicked’ challenges facing government in the post-industrial era, the Centre of Government (CoG) is increasingly being called upon to provide coherence to government action.¹ Regarded as the ‘engine’ of government, the CoG works to support and facilitate action for government as a whole.

A review of the literature has shown that there are two main ways of defining the Centre of Government (CoG).² The first definition focuses on the *structural* entities that compose the CoG. According to this definition, the CoG is viewed as a series of specific units or institutions that are typically charged with serving the Head of Government (HoG) and the Council of Ministers (CoM). The institutions that traditionally compose the CoG are the Prime Minister’s Office, Cabinets of deputy Prime Ministers, press and communication units, units for technical support, legislative units, units for policy co-ordination, and units for managing government relations. Many of these units are centrally located within government structures.

There are two main challenges when adopting a *structural* understanding of the CoG. Firstly, the combination of units that are responsible for serving the HoG and CoM vary significantly between countries, making it difficult to draw cross-country comparisons.³ Secondly, the responsibilities associated with the CoG may be performed by organisations and units that are not located within the centre. Conversely, not all units that are centrally located within government perform functions associated with the CoG. A structural definition of the CoG obscures the unique functional responsibilities that render the CoG distinct from other segments of government.

The second definition accounts for the specific *functions* performed by the CoG. According to this definition, the CoG is seen as the units and agencies that perform certain functions regardless of their location within larger government structures.⁴ The main functions of the CoG are derived from the *collective responsibilities* of government. Unlike other branches of government, the CoG is not involved in service delivery or in particular policy areas. Rather, the CoG plays a key role in ensuring coherent strategic direction, co-ordinating government-wide action, and serving as a steward for the public service as a whole.

This paper adopts a functional definition of the CoG, understanding the CoG as the units that perform specified functions regardless of their location within the machinery of government.

The remainder of this paper elaborates on the key functions performed by the centre in serving the HoG, the CoM, and in leading the professional public service. It frames lines of inquiry to think about the role of the CoG

¹ Martin Alessandro, Mariano Lafuente, and Carlos Santiso. The Role of the Centre of Government: A Literature Review (Washington D.C.: Inter-American Development Bank, 2013).

² Martin Alessandro, Mariano Lafuente, and Carlos Santiso. The Role of the Centre of Government: A Literature Review.

³ Martin Alessandro, Mariano Lafuente, and Carlos Santiso. Strengthening the Centre of Government in Latin America and the Caribbean. (Washington D.C.: Inter-American Development Bank, 2013).

⁴ Martin Alessandro, Mariano Lafuente, and Carlos Santiso, Strengthening the Centre of Government in Latin America and the Caribbean.

and the responsibilities needed to adapt to changing needs and circumstances.

Mapping Out the Key Functions of the CoG

The main functions of the CoG can be broadly grouped into three categories.

1. The CoG works to help the HoG to ensure that the overall performance of government is effective and co-ordinated. The CoG aims to provide *coherence* to the government's strategic priorities and to help the government communicate its overall strategic direction in a unified voice.⁵
2. The CoG works to support the CoM in translating strategic priorities into ministerial action plans. The CoG supports the CoM by co-ordinating ministerial priorities to ensure that policies are aligned across ministries with the government's agenda.⁶
3. The CoG acts as a *steward* for the public service as an institution and works to enhance the performance of the public sector as a whole. The CoG helps to promote the efficient and harmonious functioning of the political-professional interface and to create the infrastructure to facilitate co-operation and knowledge sharing across government.⁷

Some of these functions are exercised by the *Head of the Civil Service* (HoC) (Secretary General, Secretary of State or Secretary to the Cabinet as the case may be), and some by units in various ministries including Finance, Treasury Board etc.

Questions to Consider:

- What are the main *administrative* functions for supporting the HoG and the CoM:
 - a. To ensure strategic coherence?
 - b. To ensure government-wide co-ordination?
 - c. To support the functioning of the public service as a whole?
- What are the main challenges facing the *administrative units* leading the transformation of the public service as an institution?
- Where are these functions located?
- How are they co-ordinated?

⁵ World Bank. The Practice of Policy-making in the OECD: Ideas for Latin America. Public Sector and Governance Unit, Latin America and the Caribbean Region. (World Bank: Washington D. C., 2010).

⁶ Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG: The Functions and Organisation of the Government Office Comparative Analysis of OECD Countries, CEECs and Western Balkan Countries (OECD: Paris, 2004).

⁷ Jocelyne Bourgon. *Serving in the 21st Century: The Challenges of Serving from the Centre of Government (CoG)*. Paper presented at the OECD Public Governance Review held in Tallinn, Estonia on May 26-27, 2014. *Unpublished*.

1. Serving the Head of Government

As Chair of the CoM, the HoG is responsible for the collective performance of government and for securing the coherent fulfilment of government priorities.⁸ One of the key functions of the CoG is to provide *support to the HoG in its responsibility to ensure the overall performance of government*.

Distinct from the units, offices, and commissions that carry out line functions and report directly to the HoG, the CoG works to help the HoG by co-ordinating the broader government agenda across the branches of government and by communicating strategic priorities on behalf of the government as a whole.

In serving the HoG, the CoG is responsible for ensuring that a *coherent strategic direction* is pursued across government.⁹ The CoG consolidates information from a variety of sources, weighs policy options, and leads the bureaucracy to facilitate coherent action.

Viewed as having a broader understanding of the larger government priorities than individual agencies, the CoG is typically called upon to advise ministries and the CoM on the timing and sequencing of initiatives to ensure government-wide coherence.

Coherent Strategic Direction

The CoG is instrumental in translating electoral platforms into government programs, working with ministries to define the strategic actions needed in key policy areas.

In this role, the CoG serves as the main entity charged with assisting the HoG and the CoM in *aligning action plans and budgets across agencies*. The CoG is responsible for helping the HoG to navigate competing demands on fiscal and other resources, and to ensure that strategic priorities across ministries are aligned with existing government policies.¹⁰

Specifically, the CoG helps to ensure that policy deliberation accounts for the broader economic, political, and social context within a country, and works to detect emerging trends that may threaten the capacity to achieve the overall agenda for government.¹¹

The CoG keeps the HoG informed on developments affecting government priorities, allowing the HoG and the CoM to respond to issues or make changes when necessary.¹²

⁸ World Bank. The Practice of Policy-making in the OECD: Ideas for Latin America. Public Sector and Governance Unit, Latin America and the Caribbean Region. (World Bank: Washington D.C., 2010).

⁹ Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG: The Functions and Organisation of the Government Office Comparative Analysis of OECD Countries, CEECs and Western Balkan Countries (OECD: Paris, 2004).

¹⁰ Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG.

¹¹ Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG.

¹² Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG.

Supporting the HoG – Coherent Strategic Direction

- What *administrative functions* are provided to assist the HoG:
 - a. To set strategic direction?
 - b. To ensure the coherent allocation of resources and capabilities in support of government-wide priorities?
 - c. To ensure that ministerial plans reflect government-wide priorities?
 - d. To detect emerging issues that may affect the overall performance of government?
- Who are the main actors performing each of these functions?
- Where are these functions located?
- How are they co-ordinated?

Coherent Government-Wide Communication

Through ensuring coherence amongst government communications, the CoG helps the HoG to ensure that government *speaks with one voice*.

Rising public demand for information has increased the need for governments to co-ordinate policy messages to ensure that communications are coherent, effectively timed, and aligned throughout government.¹³ While ministries are responsible for communications related to particular areas of competence, the CoG manages communications for the government as a whole. Through ensuring coherence amongst government communications, the CoG helps the HoG to ensure that government *speaks with one voice*.

The main mechanisms for co-ordinating government communications typically utilised by the CoG include: regular meetings between ministerial communications advisors chaired by a government spokesperson, strategic communication planning, and a regular item of communication on the agenda for CoM meetings.¹⁴

Supporting the HoG – Speaking with One Voice

- Who are the main actors involved in co-ordinating communication on behalf of the government?
- What are the mechanisms to manage the political-professional interface?
- What are the main challenges in co-ordinating government-wide communication?

¹³ Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG.

¹⁴ Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG.

2. Serving the Council of Ministers

Another key function of the CoG is to support the *collective responsibility* of the CoM to ensure government-wide co-ordination.¹⁵

The CoG works to anticipate challenges to the implementation of larger government policies and works to evaluate and course-correct ministerial progress towards achieving government-wide priorities.

Through working with ministries to facilitate cross-ministerial dialogue, the CoG serves the CoM by attempting to build consensus and aligning government priorities across ministries. The CoG works as a non-partisan actor to serve the interests of the government as a whole.

The CoG aims to ensure that cross-cutting issues and proposals are considered and addressed from multiple angles to strengthen consistency across ministries and throughout government.

Co-ordinating the Council of Ministers

The capacity of the CoG to co-ordinate government is not derived from its ability to order ministries to adopt specific actions, but from a wider acknowledgment of the importance of co-ordination from all actors within the system.

The CoG acts as the main body for co-ordinating inter-ministerial action.¹⁶ The CoG has *no formal hierarchical authority* over ministries and acts as an honest broker on behalf of government as a whole. The capacity of the CoG to co-ordinate government is not derived from its ability to order ministries to adopt specific actions, but from a wider acknowledgment of the importance of co-ordination from all actors within the system.¹⁷

The CoG is responsible for supporting the CoM. It manages the ministerial agenda, co-ordinates the preparation of CoM sessions, and distributes materials to all participants. To help ensure the effective functioning of the CoM, the CoG scrutinises ministerial plans and works to facilitate collective decision-making on key issues.

The CoG helps the CoM by co-ordinating policy across ministries. It works to facilitate inter-ministerial consultations to enhance policy co-ordination and acts as a mediator to solve inter-ministerial disputes.

The CoG is also responsible for co-ordinating the policy message across ministries, ensuring that ministerial communications are appropriately timed and aligned with the day-to-day communication strategy.

Finally, the CoG is tasked with co-ordinating key strategic priorities across ministries by facilitating inter-agency co-operation and reporting to the CoM on issues of shared responsibility.¹⁸

¹⁵ Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG.

¹⁶ Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG.

¹⁷ Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG.

¹⁸ Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG.

Supporting the CoM – Co-ordinating Across Ministries

- What support functions are provided by the civil service:
 - a. To prepare and manage the CoM agenda?
 - b. To scrutinise policy proposals?
 - c. To co-ordinate the pursuit of key strategic priorities?
 - d. To mediate and resolve-conflict?
 - e. To co-ordinate communications across ministries?
- Who are the main actors involved in performing each of these functions?
- What are the main levers used to co-ordinate across ministries?
- What are the main challenges in co-ordinating across ministries?

Monitoring and Course-Correcting

By monitoring the progress of ministries towards achieving the key strategic priorities of government, the CoG is able to detect the need to course-correct when progress is lagging.¹⁹

While the CoG itself does not monitor the individual policies and procedures of each government agency, it does oversee and co-ordinate the monitoring and reporting functions of ministries on key government-wide priorities.

Supporting the CoM – Monitoring and Course-Correcting

- What mechanisms are used to monitor progress on key strategic priorities?
- Where does the responsibility rest in the public service to identify the need to course-correct on key government-wide priorities?

¹⁹ Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG.

3. The Stewardship Role of the CoG in Leading Transformation

The CoG the *steward of the professional public service as an institution*. Preparing public organisations and public institutions to be fit for the time is one of the key responsibilities of the CoG.

The functions exercised at the CoG contribute to the harmonious functioning of the political-professional interface.²⁰ An open and reciprocal relationship is central for ensuring coherence across government. A dysfunctional relationship will curtail the ability for government to lead an ambitious reform agenda through its professional civil service. In the absence of an effective relationship, the public service is unable to meaningfully contribute knowledge and expertise to policy decisions and transformations. The CoG works to mediate tensions, resolve conflicts, and ensure the coherence of priorities and policies across the political-professional interface to support the overall functioning of government and of the public service.

The CoG harnesses the collective power of the public service in support of the government's priorities. It creates an enabling environment to generate better public results. It integrates service delivery functions to strengthen the relationship of government with citizens. It leads the on-going transformation necessary to build the capacity of the public service to fulfil its mission in the future.

The CoG is responsible for moving beyond ministerial and individual objectives to support the effective functioning of the public service as a whole. Through facilitating knowledge sharing, providing guidance, and building common infrastructure to encourage co-operation, the CoG helps to harness the collective resources and capabilities available across the public service to inform current and future policy choices.

Acting as One

Acting as one...is about ensuring that the branches of government pursue consistent and coherent policies across government.

A professional public service fit for the times should be able to *act as one*, *serve as one*, and *learn as one*.

Acting as one is the capacity to forge an ambitious common agenda and to work as a unified whole. It is about ensuring that the branches of government pursue consistent and coherent policies across government.²¹

It requires that the political and professional public sector *work as one* to ensure the overall performance of government. The CoG works to ensure that political agendas are informed by the knowledge of public service professionals, while actions taken by the professional public service support the larger political priorities.

²⁰ Jocelyn Bourgon, *A New Synthesis of Public Administration* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 104-105.

²¹ Jocelyne Bourgon. *Serving in the 21st Century: The Challenges of Serving from the Centre of Government (CoG)*. Paper presented at the OECD Public Governance Review held in Tallinn, Estonia on May 26-27, 2014. *Unpublished*.

The CoG is called upon to facilitate dialogue, manage conflicts, and monitor progress to ensure that the political and professional branches of government are aligned. It acts as a mechanism for facilitating co-operation across the political and professional public service. The CoG helps government to *speak with one voice*. This requires building and supporting a relationship of trust and an on-going dialogue between the HoG, the HoC, ministries, and Permanent Secretaries to ensure the alignment of the government agenda with the actions of the civil service.

Stewardship – Acting as One

- Identify the key points of contact in the political-professional interface?
- What mechanisms are used to contribute to the harmonious function of the political-professional interface:
 - a. Across government?
 - b. Across the CoG?
- What else could be done?

Serving as One

The CoG leads public service-wide transformation to create the infrastructure necessary to encourage a diversity of approaches including co-creation, co-production, and self-organisation.

Serving as one is about developing the capabilities and government-wide infrastructure to allow the public service to use its knowledge, know-how, capabilities and service delivery channels to ensure a citizen-centric approach to the role of government.²²

The CoG helps the public service to *serve as one* by integrating service delivery. It strengthens the relationship between government and citizens and improves the experience of citizens when engaging with the government. In essence, the CoG plays a special role in creating a *relationship of trust* between citizens, government, public organisations, and public institutions.

The CoG leads public service-wide transformation to create the infrastructure necessary to encourage a diversity of approaches including co-creation, co-production, and self-organisation. It encourages innovation by equipping public servants with the skills and capabilities needed to fulfil their public purpose.

²² Jocelyne Bourgon. *Serving in the 21st Century: The Challenges of Serving from the Centre of Government (CoG)*. Paper presented at the OECD Public Governance Review held in Tallinn, Estonia on May 26-27, 2014. *Unpublished*.

Stewardship – Serving as One

- What functions, systems, and procedures are currently used to help public agencies (ministries) to *serve as one*?
- Describe the:
 - a. Co-operation platforms?
 - b. Co-decision making platforms?
 - c. Co-ordination platforms?
- What can 'you' /your unit bring to a public service-wide effort to *serve as one*?

Learning as One

Learning as one is the capacity of the public service to continually improve system-wide results and societal impact.

Learning as one is the capacity of the public service to continually improve system-wide results and societal impact. It includes the capacity to share knowledge and information across ministries and government silos, as well as the capacity to anticipate and initiate proactive interventions to reduce risks or to improve the likelihood of more desirable outcomes for society. It requires a capacity to adapt and change course when necessary. It is a characteristic of a professional public service that is fit for the times.

Stewardship – Learning as One

- What functions, systems, and procedures contribute to the capacity of the public service to *learn as one*?
- What will be needed going forward to support:
 - a. Shared knowledge?
 - b. Shared monitoring of system-wide and societal results?
 - c. Shared accountability for collective efforts?
- What can 'you' /your agency contribute to a public service-wide effort to *learn as one*?

Moving Forward – NS Laboratory for the Center of Government

The NS Initiative is committed to working with practitioners to help build government that is fit for the challenges of serving in a post-industrial era.

The role of the CoG has received insufficient attention in recent public sector reform. The time is right to re-think and re-conceptualise the role of the CoG. It is for this purpose that the *NS Lab for Serving from the Centre of Government* has been designed.

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ANNEX: Key Terms and Definitions²³

Council of Ministers (CoM): Used to refer to the members of the government collectively.

Head of Government (HoG): This is the generic term used to refer to the highest, or second highest official in government. Typically, the HoG is the person who presides over Cabinet.

Head of Civil Service (HoC): This is a generic term used to denote the highest ranking civil servant within a government. The HoCS goes by a variety of names in different countries, including State Secretary, Secretary-General, and Cabinet Secretary.

Head of Agencies (HoA): Refers to the highest ranking civil servant within a given ministry. HoAs include Deputy Ministers,

Ministerial Committee: Term describes official committees of ministers, usually created to address particular sectors, that serve as forums for discussing items in detail and resolving disagreements before items reach the CoM. Such committees are generally permanent, at least during the term of a particular PM, and are often led by senior ministers or deputy Prime Minister.

Policy: Often imbedded in law, a policy is an approach to solving a problem or improving a situation.

State Secretary: Used to denote the administrative head of a ministry. The role of the State Secretary differs between countries.

Secretary-General: Term is used to denote the head of the Government Office. Again, the role of the Secretary-General is country specific.

²³ All definitions taken from Michael Ben-Gera, Co-ordination at the CoG: The Functions and Organisation of the Government Office Comparative Analysis of OECD Countries, CEECs and Western Balkan Countries (OECD: Paris, 2004).