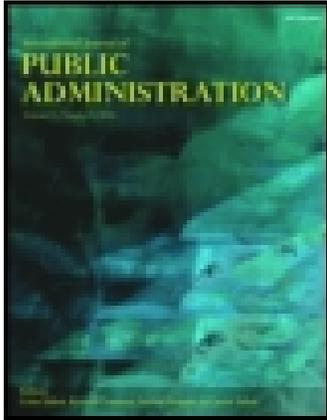


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Top-Down Approaches to Joined-Up Government: Examining the Unintended Consequences of Weak Implementation

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Top-Down Approaches to Joined-Up Government: Examining the Unintended Consequences of Weak Implementation

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Since forming part of Blair's modernization agenda in the UK, joined-up government has become a central ambition of governments in many industrialized countries. While there continues to be an absence of core methods and principles for achieving joined-up government, consensus has emerged around the effectiveness of top down approaches. Research has found that joining must happen at multiple levels and be supported by a range of cultural and structural interventions. This article presents findings from a study into the Australian Social Inclusion Agenda and explores the long-term and unintended consequences of joined-up initiatives that take a top-down approach.

Keywords: joined-up government, joined-up governance, social inclusion, policy implementation

INTRODUCTION

Since forming part of Blair's modernization agenda in the UK, joined-up government has become a central ambition of governments in many industrialized countries (6, 2004), in policy areas as diverse as domestic violence (Office of Women's Policy, 2002), drugs and crime (Homel, Nutly, Webb, & Tilley, 2004), and homelessness (Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, 2005).

While there continues to be an absence of core methods and principles for achieving joined-up government, consensus has emerged around the effectiveness of top down approaches (6, 2004). Joined-up government can be pursued on a variety of levels, top-down refers to initiatives that are

directed from an "authoritative core" at strategic levels of government (Keast, 2011). For effective integration, research has found that joining must happen at multiple levels and be supported by a range of cultural and structural interventions (Klijen & Koppenjan, 1997; O'Flynn, Buick, Blackman, & Halligan, 2011; Ross, Frere, Healey, & Humphreys, 2011). On their own, top-down approaches have been found to lack the capacity to reach street-level actions (Keast, 2011; 6, 2004). As Christensen and Laegrid (2007, p. 1063) argue, joined-up government "is, to a great extent, about lower-level politics and getting people on the ground in municipalities, regions [and] local government organisation . . . to work together."

Despite the known limitations of top-down approaches to joined-up government, in 2007 the Australian Federal Government launched the Social Inclusion Agenda (SIA)—a joining up aimed at addressing social disadvantage, which shares many of the features of top-down approaches to joined-up government. Through case studies of nongovernment organizations targeted under the SIA and interviews

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with federal policymakers, this article explores the limitations of top-down approaches and their legacy for future reform efforts.

BACKGROUND

The Social Inclusion Agenda

In 2007, the Australian Federal Government launched a joined-up approach to social inequality. Through the SIA, the Labor Government sought to strengthen the Australian welfare state, reducing inequality and disadvantage while building social, economic, and civic participation (Gillard & Wong, 2007; for more details on the SIA see Carey et al., 2012). Running until 2013, the targets of reform included education, employment, health, and infrastructure such as law, “financials,” and economic services (Commonwealth Government of Australia, 2009a, 2009b).

Drawing on international discourses of, and experimentation with, Third Way approaches to governing and social exclusion, the Labor Government gave unprecedented policy attention to nongovernment organizations, singling out the “third sector” as a key implementer of the Agenda at the local level. When launching the SIA, the Labor Government announced that it needed a “strong non-profit sector to partner with . . . and help meet both current and emerging policy priorities” (Stephens, 2008). The inclusion of the sector in the SIA has been described as an unparalleled step in the positioning of the third sector in Australian social policy (Butcher, 2011). Under the Agenda, the sector was encouraged to build new relationships with government in order to facilitate a more integrated service delivery, and develop innovative ways to address social problems (particularly in their service delivery) (Stephens, 2008). Similarly, policymakers are encouraged to engage in new partnerships with nongovernment organizations, in order to facilitate more tailored and joined-up services (Commonwealth Government, 2009a).

Efforts to create joined-up government can target either vertical (e.g. linking national and local actors) or horizontal (e.g. forming partnerships between actors at the same level) integration (Ling, 2002; Matheson, 2000; Stewart, 2002). Depending on which approach they favor, these initiatives are often described as following top-down (vertical integration) or “bottom-up” models (horizontal integration at the practitioner level) (Keast, 2011; Matheson, 2000). The mechanisms used to implement the SIA and create joining-up for social inclusion can be classified as top-down. Top-down refers to approaches that “emanate” from an authoritative core (i.e. political or strategic leadership) and are thought to “flow down” to lower levels, in this case government departments and nongovernment organizations (Keast, 2011; Ryan, Williams, Charles, & Waterhouse, 2008). Two mechanisms were used for implementation: a “policy narrative” aimed at creating cultural and institutional change and

administrative restructuring—including the creation of new interdepartmental bodies.

Policy narratives or currents are said to sit above policies and act as a rallying call, directional pointer, and broad benchmark for change (Bills, 2001), and were a feature of the Blair Government’s approach to social exclusion in the UK. Policy narratives are an attempt to unite actors behind a common goal; they are not intended to directly modify behavior, but rather create shifts in values and ways in which problems are perceived, which is seen as an important precursor to change (Christensen & Laegrid, 2007; de Bruijn & de Heuvelhof, 1997; Klijen & Koppenjan, 1997).

In addition to the policy narrative, a range of new administrative structures were created to facilitate joining-up. An advisory body—the Social Inclusion Board—was established to provide direction on issues relating to social inclusion from experts outside of government. This was followed by the creation of the Social Inclusion Unit—an interdepartmental working committee located in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Administrative structures such as interdepartmental task forces and intergovernmental committees are common features of joined-up government approaches. Their aim is to create integration across “siloes” departments, promoting agreement, collaboration, and the tackling of inconsistent policies (Pollit, 2003; Richards, 2001).

Consistent with a top-down perspective, these two mechanisms operated primarily within government; despite the inclusion of nongovernment organizations on the Social Inclusion Board, their role was constrained to providing advice to government. Beyond engaging nongovernment actors in the new goal of creating social inclusion, no formal mechanisms were put in place to facilitate the implementation of the SIA outside of government. This is despite the unprecedented emphasis placed on the not-for-profit sector for implementation.

While a clear mandate and strong political leadership has been found to be critical to positive outcomes (Blackman, Buick, Halligan, & Marsh, 2010; Karre, Van der Steen, & Van Twist, 2013), the evidence suggests that top-down mechanisms are insufficient on their own to create integration at lower levels (Christensen & Laegrid, 2007; Keast, 2011; Keast, Brown, & Mandell, 2007). In order to change existing siloed practices, joined-up working cannot simply be imposed from the top (Bakvis & Juillet, 2004; Karre et al., 2013). Kickert and Koppenjan (1997, p. 39) argue that within a networked approach to governance, there is no definitive top: “government is not a single dominant actor that can unilaterally impose its will.” In fact, the creation of top-down mechanisms such as interdepartmental task forces have been found to limit consensus building and consistency, both within government and between government and other organizations (Davies, 2009; James, 2004; Keast, 2011; Kickert & Koppenjan, 1997). Keast (2011, p. 229) argues that “while

top-down approaches are important to set priorities and push through a joined-up ethos, cooperative relations on the ground may prove to be more important in the long run.” These relationships, amongst nongovernment actors and government agencies at the service-delivery level, can be supported by resourcing (joining-up is expensive), network meetings, training, and dedicated efforts to build strong relationships (Keast, 2011).

Overall, the literature suggests that the implementation of the SIA and the achievement of its goals were likely to be stifled by the lack of mechanisms in place to support integration at lower levels. In investigating the implementation experiences of the SIA, the research discussed in this article found that reliance on top-down approaches has repercussions that stretch beyond the success of the reform under question. By adopting two theoretical frameworks—structuration theory (Giddens, 1984) and diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 2003)—we examine the implications of relying on top-down mechanisms, and argue that the implementation experiences of the SIA are likely to stifle future reform efforts.

METHODS

The aim of the study was to explore the implementation experiences of key social policy actors (government policymakers and nongovernment organizations) involved in the implementation of the Australian SIA.

Case Studies of Non-Government Organizations

A comparative case study methodology was used with two third sector organizations charged with implementing the SIA (Blaikie, 2000; Yin, 1994). Two nongovernment organizations were purposefully sampled for comparative case study analysis, using a maximum variation approach (Yin, 1994). One organization—referred to as Swithin’s Social Services—looked favorably on the government’s new joined-up initiative, whilst the second organization—St Martha’s Mission—was reticent about the SIA. See Carey (2010) for full study protocol and sampling criteria.

The case study research combined semi-structured qualitative interviews with 6 months observation and a document review. Nineteen staff were interviewed across the two case study organizations, with participants ranging from frontline workers through to CEOs and management.

Key Informant Interviews with Policymakers

Key informant interviews were conducted within three government departments taking a lead role in the implementation of the SIA. Snowball sampling was used in order to identify participants (Blaikie, 2000).

TABLE 1
Participants and Their Identification Codes

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Code</i>
St Martha’s Mission	Frontline	A01
St Martha’s Mission	Program Manager	A02
St Martha’s Mission	Frontline	A03
St Martha’s Mission	Frontline	A04
St Martha’s Mission	Frontline	A05
St Martha’s Mission	Frontline	A06
St Martha’s Mission	Program Manager	A07
St Martha’s Mission	Senior Manager	A08
St Martha’s Mission	Senior Manager	A09
St Martha’s Mission	Senior Manager	A10
Swithin’s Social Services	Frontline	B01
Swithin’s Social Services	Frontline	B02
Swithin’s Social Services	Frontline	B03
Swithin’s Social Services	Program-related staff member	B04
Swithin’s Social Services	Program Manager	B05
Swithin’s Social Services	Program Manager	B06
Swithin’s Social Services	Program Manager	B07
Swithin’s Social Services	Senior Manager	B08
Swithin’s Social Services	Senior Manager	B09

Six interviews were conducted in total. Participants ranged from current and past deputy departmental secretaries and directors of units, to current and former branch managers and senior advisors (e.g. to the Prime Minister). Given the small number of individuals able to comment on the Agenda and the very senior nature of the participants, combined with the fact that interviewees began to nominate individuals already interviewed, one can infer that the “population” of potential participants was largely exhausted. Table 1 provides an overview of participants and their accompanying identification code.

Analysis

Through a process akin to open coding (Strauss, 1987), “like” data were grouped together to form categories and subcategories. These categories were gradually developed into themes, by linking and drawing connections between initial categories and hypothesizing about consequences and likely explanations for the appearance of certain phenomena (Strauss, 1987). Here, there is a shifting between first-order constructs (i.e. what participants said) and second-order (theoretical or technical) constructs (Schutz, 1963). Selective coding was then carried out, whereby transcripts were revisited with the explicit intent of finding further linkages and connections between phenomena and the core themes being developed. The analysis of the key informant interviews was necessarily influenced by the organizational case studies.

The robustness and integrity of the analysis was tested through peer scrutiny, challenging of assumptions, and the seeking of alternate explanations (Huberman & Miles, 1998).

THE CONCEPTUAL LENS

Since the 1970s, the “implementation behaviour” of organizations, has been of central interest to policy implementation scholars (Friedman, 2008; Kettl, 2000; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). This research has found that the experiences of organizations and staff are instrumental to the implementation of social policy (Lipsky, 1980). Policies are understood to be “substantially shaped by the organisations that operate *between* inputs and outputs” (Meyers & Dillon, 1999, p. 233), making “organisational analysis a major concern for policy” (Friedman, 2008, p. 482).

Specifically, organizational “contexts” have been found to shape implementation (Hill & Hupe, 2009; Meyers & Dillon, 1999; Sandfort, 1999). These contexts are made up of norms, values, and beliefs. For example, in a study of welfare-to-work programs, Sandfort (1999, p. 316) found that the “collective beliefs create parameters within which staff interpret [policy] rules.” The challenge for researchers is how to conceptualize and “unpack” the relationships between organizational contexts, collective beliefs, and implementation decisions. In this study, two theoretical lenses were adopted in order to meet this challenge: diffusion of innovations theory and structuration theory.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Diffusion of innovations theory is concerned with the spread of new ideas within social systems (Rogers, 2003, see also Green, Ottoson, & Hiatt, 2009). “Diffusion” is the process by which “an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (Rogers, 2003, p. 5). As a whole, the expansive body of research on the diffusion of innovations demonstrates that getting a new idea accepted—even if it offers clear advantages—can be very difficult. The “newness” of innovations means there is uncertainty about how they will be received and if they will be adopted (Rogers, 2003).

Diffusion of innovations theory highlights three areas for consideration when examining the spread and uptake of a new idea. These are the characteristics of the innovation, the context(s) in which it might be adopted, and the channels of communication through which ideas spread between and within social groups. With the right “fit” between these three factors, diffusion theory suggests that an idea can be successfully adopted.

Early diffusion of innovations research focused on the individual adoption of predominately technological innovations in areas such as health care and agriculture, known as product-based innovations (see Rogers, 1962, and a summary of this work in Greenhalgh, Robert, MacFarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou’s, 2004 systematic review). Later research has since broadened to encompass process-based innovations.

Process-based innovations are new ideas for practice or new ways of working—such as a joined-up government

initiative. Their adoption has been found to be a far more nuanced and complex process than the adoption of a new tool or simple product (Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Van de Ven, Angle, & Poole, 1989). Not only is the type of innovation itself significantly more complex, but so too is the unit of adoption. In process-based innovations, the unit of adoption is more likely to be a team, a department, or an entire organization (Greenhalgh et al., 2004). Rather than imitation, changes to structure and ways of working must occur across these groups of individuals. Greenhalgh et al. (2004) argue that under these circumstances, the adoption of an innovation by a social system will be necessarily more organic and messy.

Diffusion of innovations theory is used in this article to explore the spread of the SIA amongst different policy actors. In the discussion, where we examine the interrelationships between the three contexts investigated in the study, we draw on concepts from structuration theory; a structuration lens helps to examine how practices are structured in different contexts.

Structuration Theory

Structuration refers to the processes by which social structure is produced, reproduced, and transformed in and through the practice of social agents (Giddens, 1984). In other words, social structures that guide people’s actions (within for example an organization) are developed out of their routines, collective beliefs and norms, and practices.

Specifically, in this study we draw on Giddens’ concept of duality of structure. The duality of structure refers to not only the processes by which structures are produced by human activity, but are also the medium of this activity. Through exploring structure and agency as a “duality,” Giddens seeks to balance the role of each in the production of social practices, giving preference to neither.

From a structurationist perspective, structures are both constraining and enabling. The structural properties of systems do not act on agents, like forces of nature that are beyond agents’ control, but are mobilized *by* agents—it is “agents who bring structure into being, and it is structure that produces the possibility of agency” (Cassell, 1993, p. 12). From a structurationist perspective, structures therefore have no reality other than that they are instantiated in activity or are retained mentally as “remembered codes of conduct” (Cassell, 1993; Giddens, 1984; Whittington, 1992). Giddens (1984) uses the example of language to illustrate this: language enables expression, but we are simultaneously constrained by its grammatical rules, or structural qualities. Moreover, in using language we reproduce it. Hence, structures provide both the resources for action, and are also the outcome of this action.

The duality of structure helps to elucidate how change takes place in organizational contexts. By conceptualizing context as both a medium and outcome of human activity, it

helps to reveal the ways in which action is historically conditioned. Giddens (1984) argues that actions are deeply colored by past experiences and existing knowledge, (which we draw on in order to act).

FINDINGS

Case Study 1

St Martha's is a medium sized faith-based organization. Within the organization, there is a strong focus on continuity and, as a result, the organization is highly resistant to externally directed change. "Maintaining fidelity to its foundation principles" is seen as paramount, irrespective of how the political environment changes (internal organizational document, 2000). This extends to the acceptance of government funding: "If that funding goes against what we believe, well we won't apply for that funding. If that funding means we have to do this, well we won't accept it." [A05].

The perception that externally directed change is unhelpful to St Martha's has been created by past experiences of implementing new policies. Senior staff at St Martha's argue that they have adapted their work and language to government policies before, only to find that both governments and policies change. This legacy precluded staff from seeing a clear advantage to implementing new policies. Rather, they have become distrustful of government initiatives and government policy:

[St Martha's] has been around really since the 1800s and we have—we've fallen into the trap of changing our language and the whole way we approach things only to find that after a three year term of government, it's all gone anyway. [A09]

Rogers (2003) suggests that innovations must offer adopters a clear advantage in order for them to be successfully assimilated. For St Martha's, the legacy of previous policies has precluded workers from seeing a clear advantage to implementing new policies. Workers felt they were left with a set of language and ideas that had no internal validity within the organization, while offering them little political currency in the longer term because of the transient nature of governments and policy.

St Martha's past experiences with government policy have therefore created system norms, whereby staff carefully manage external influences on the organization. Governments and social policy reform efforts are perceived to be highly transient and therefore risky to an organization focused on maintaining its work in and with communities. Consequently, the "system-innovation fit" of new policies is likely to be poor, irrespective of policy content or approach (Rogers, 2003). Indeed, new policies and government-directed change are treated suspiciously, as government is perceived to be highly volatile and out of touch with the problems addressed by the nongovernment sector.

Unfortunately, I think government just want quick fixes and they just want to . . . get from here to here in the least amount of time – 'we want everyone housed, we want everyone at school, we want everyone' – you can't. They've got their heads in the clouds. [A02]

Despite the caution exhibited around government-directed change, the initial launch of the SIA was greeted enthusiastically. The SIA was taken as an indication of shared concerns:

I think the Social Inclusion Agenda is an indication, I thought of it as an indication of government moving back to governing for the well-being of the community as opposed to just organising economies and so on. [A09]

The Agenda was also seen as extending an opportunity, and challenge, to the sector to contribute to social policy: "the Australian Labor Government has thrown out a challenge to the community sector" (internal organizational document, 2008). They saw the SIA as a "work in progress," with "agencies and communities well placed to impact on its development and priorities" (internal organizational document, 2008).

Despite this, St Martha's was reticent about the SIA. As Levitas (1998) has now famously demonstrated, there are different discourses of social inclusion, which individuals can "slip" between in order to frame the problems of "exclusion" and "inclusion" differently, and advocate for alternative policy strategies and solutions. These discourses vary in the degree to which they conceptualize issues of exclusion as a responsibility of society or the individual (Giddens, 1998; Levitas, 2004).¹ Consequently, St Martha's staff were distrustful, unclear what they were "signing up to" [A10] if they engaged with the SIA: "We don't tend to use [social inclusion] here because there's a lack of clarity around what that means . . ." the CEO explained, "it has no clear definition or clear agenda around what that means on the ground and I think that's where people struggle with it or avoid it." [A10].

While staff viewed the SIA as a positive indication of government intentions, they did not capitalize on it as a potential rallying point for the sector, or their own organization, to push and advocate for desired change. Moreover, by not engaging with the SIA or participating in the process of clarifying what social inclusion could mean "on the ground," workers did not examine or grapple with what the SIA meant for their practice. Rather, workers' interpretations of their past experiences with policy approaches and reform agendas led them to believe that the SIA was not worth substantial organizational investment. From the perspective of

¹While it has been argued that, at the political level, the terms social inclusion and exclusion operate differently, in this study participants used these terms interchangeably (Labonte, 2004).

senior managers, the SIA, like the policies that came before it, could change or disappear:

We've really just continued to do what we do and we try and, I guess, accommodate and work with government policy, the changes accordingly within those areas. Governments can change – the agenda can change. [A10]

A working paper on the SIA released by Catholic Social Services Australia, a major peak body representing over 180 welfare organizations, suggests that this view was shared by other parts of the sector:

While dramatic narratives of reform can help build support, the downside is that they set the stage for disappointment. When success fails to come easily or quickly, the direction of the story can shift abruptly . . . In Australia, policymakers may eventually find a new label for programs focused on entrenched disadvantage. 'Social inclusion' may lose its shine and fall from use in the same way that 'social justice' did in the 1990s. (CASSA, 2010, p. 52)

Paradoxically, this statement suggests that the more ambitious the reform vision, the greater likelihood it will be assumed to be ineffective, and the more chance it will be ignored by nongovernment organizations (thereby contributing to its ineffectiveness).

Fairclough (2000) argues that social policies do not come ready formed; they are shaped and reshaped in public discourse and political debate and, arguably, implementation. In the early stages of the SIA, significant doubt was expressed in public debates (such as in newspapers and media (see, for example, Falzon, 2009; Latham, 2010), social policy forums (Australian Social Policy Conference, 2009), policy submissions (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2009), and responses from independent policy centers and think tanks (Cox, 2010; Hetherington, 2010) which appeared to significantly impact the implementation of the SIA. Much of this debate centered around concerns that, under the SIA, the government was focusing too narrowly on employment. Social policy researchers and commentators argued that these social integrationist approaches to social inclusion, where increasing paid employment becomes the sole objective of social policy, ignore the inequality and exclusion that can occur amongst the employed (Levitas, 1998; see for example, Masterman-Smith, 2009; Perkins, 2010). By focusing on employment, the core elements of social inclusion were thought to be lost, such as multi-dimensional perspective, joined-up policy responses, and a more dynamic approach to social problems (Perkins, 2010).

Diffusion theory tells us that the observability of an innovation "in practice" impacts upon the spread and adoption of new ideas (Rogers, 2003). However, in social policy new ideas can be difficult to observe. Change within government (i.e. to policymaking) can be obscured from nongovernment

organizations, or may be slow to take shape, impacting on the uptake of new policies. As a result, the representation and shaping of policy in public debate becomes critical to its uptake. Consistent with Fairclough's (2000) argument, St Martha's staff relied on public debate and social policy commentary to gain an understanding of what might be occurring within government, and what the new policy approach might mean. Subsequently, they interpreted the ongoing public debate between 2008 and 2011 over employment and the moral dimensions of welfare relief and the continued adherence to active employment policies as signs that the SIA was synonymous with paid work:

It is related to employment and giving people the opportunities to gain employment, so to be part of society I guess but I see our work very much . . . [not part of] that narrow definition, as including people in the community and therefore in society. [A05]

As an organization focused on providing for the very marginalized who need significant assistance before being ready to contemplate paid work, rather than seeing their organization as part of the SIA, St Martha's staff saw their role as addressing the gap left behind:

There's a lot still to be done with people who are the most marginalised, and there's the entrenched chronic families where unemployment is intergenerational and tackling that can also be very challenging . . . So I guess we have for some time almost side-stepped the SIA and just carried on. [A08]

Hence, the status of a policy innovation within a specific organizational context plays a significant role in whether it is adopted (Rogers, 2003).

While the government hoped to promote innovation and connectedness amongst nongovernment organizations (both amongst each other and with government), for St Martha's, the broad nature of the Agenda and the lack of explicit direction from government were met with confusion:

I think as far as the Social Inclusion Agenda, I think probably why we don't talk about it all the time and it's not front and centre of our thinking, is because we actually don't know what's happening – how that's being communicated and how we're being engaged on a broader level in that agenda . . .

I think that's where people get a bit cynical and say yep, so they're all having more meetings but how does that filter down. [A10]

Potentially, the perceived ambiguity of the SIA provided a policy space which organizations like St Martha's could fill, diffusion theory suggests that innovations spread more rapidly if they can be adapted in local contexts, which would seemingly give the SIA an advantage in regards to its implementation (Green et al., 2009). However, St Martha's staff explained that implementation was not possible, because

there were no clear mechanisms or shifts in resources that supported the SIA:

There's no additional resources, and there has not been any additional resources available to do the kind of work . . . [A08]

Initiatives that make new ideas more visible and display the benefits of an innovation have been found to increase the likelihood of their successful adoption (Greenhalgh et al., 2004). From the perspective of St Martha's staff, not only were there no demonstrations of the SIA, they saw no visible mechanisms for its implementation by nongovernment organizations:

It's one thing to publish a policy, and it's another to implement it. What are the mechanisms for that to happen? How are you going to make – to do that, there has to be trust and giving up control, and I don't see governments giving up control; I see governments taking more control. [A08]

Whatever small kind of things have been set up, sort of new governance structures . . . they're just so vulnerable to disappearing again when the government changes . . . I don't see it as bringing about systemic change in any significant way at all. [A09]

As their CEO quipped: "Unless an idea percolates down, it's worthless isn't it?" [A09]. The lack of implementation mechanisms at the local level meant that St Martha's staff questioned the longevity and government commitment to the Agenda.

Case Study 2

Swithin's is a faith-based organization, founded in the early 1900s and is a large organization. Swithin's founder envisaged a "pioneering" organization, focused on creating social change. In organizational documentation (such as strategic plans), Swithin's is presented as an innovative and influential leader, both within its own sector, and more broadly within the field of social and public policy. For example, strategic planning documents describe the organization's role as "creat[ing] and lead[ing] a movement to build society." While it is common within the sector to lobby and advocate for policy change, Swithin's mission statement also includes the goal to develop policy.

Primarily, Swithin's pursues its goal of policy development through creating new programs and services and making a case to government for their increased funding and implementation:

We've tried to develop some of these innovative approaches . . . and we'll increasingly be trying to sell that [to government] and say you need to change what you're doing, or this needs to be added or done differently. [B08]

Thus, at Swithin's services are delivered with a dual objective of assisting individuals and promoting broader policy change.

Swithin's will undertake research, service development and delivery and advocacy, with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, programs and practices for implementation by governments. (internal organizational document, 2009)

It is anticipated that this approach will place the organization at "the forefront of policy debate in the social welfare field," a strategy which is described as "beginning to influence major shifts in public policy" (internal organizational document, 2006). The value placed on leadership, influence, and innovation means that Swithin's is highly responsive to external change, such as changes to policy and politics. Staff seek to use innovation as a means to maintain a position at the forefront of policy debates.

For Swithin's, the SIA has a good innovation–system fit (Rogers, 2003); Swithin's began using the language of social inclusion in some of its programs as early as 2002. Consistent with Swithin's external narrative of leadership, in public documentation Swithin's staff were highly responsive to the new policy approach. Diffusion research has shown that the status of an innovation (i.e. its social and political value) determines its uptake; for Swithin's, new policy rhetoric represents fresh opportunities to garner influence. From 2008, when the government launched the Agenda, their engagement with, and use of, the term soared. In the 3 years preceding the change in government, social inclusion appeared as a headline item in just one Swithin's newsletter. Between 2008 and 2010, it appeared 18 times. Indeed, soon after the launch of the SIA, Swithin's began to position itself at the forefront of the new policy debate. The following excerpt from a newsletter argues that the organization has long been advocating for a reform agenda based around socially inclusive principles:

For some years we have been advocating something like 'social inclusion' as a new aspiration to inform a thoroughgoing reform of our welfare system. Now it appears that a new chapter has indeed begun and Australia has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape its social policy system to fit a twenty-first century social and economic environment. (internal organizational document, 2008)

In early responses to the SIA senior, staff began to articulate a formative role for the sector and the organization in the development of the Agenda:

To meet the challenge [of the SIA], we have developed a work plan to identify an approach to social inclusion which fits the Australian context. (internal organizational document, 2008)

A new cycle is beginning in Australian social policy. Will the Social Inclusion Agenda provide the framework to eradicate poverty in Australia? [To be successful] we must rebuild [welfare relief services] from *below* so Australians are guaranteed the opportunity of full economic and social participation. The challenge for Swithin's is to help remake the [social policy] agenda. (internal organizational document, 2008)

In keeping with their position of leadership, soon after the launch of the Agenda senior staff revised the structure of the organization. This was done by establishing social inclusion strategies for a range of programs and reframing the contribution of existing programs in the new policy language. Through this restructuring, senior staff aimed to demonstrate what a social inclusion approach looks like in practice, positioning the organization to feedback models and programs to government and assist in the development of policy.

Swithin's staff expected a degree of ambiguity around the reforms, stating that large-scale reform took time to build:

In terms of a Social Inclusion Agenda in Australia, it's certain the Australian Social Inclusion Agenda is at a very early stage, and it's got a long way to go. [B09]

It's nebulous and you've got to build it up and I think that takes time, as our current government has shown. It takes a lot of time to formulate something like that. I think social inclusion takes a bit of unpacking. [B04]

They also noted that communicating such reforms to policy actors was a slow process:

[Social inclusion] seems quite good, but it's tricky, a bit unclear, seems to be taking time to build an understanding and communicate it. [B04]

However, they also expressed concerns over the direction of the SIA. While the uptake of a "social inclusion approach" was initially welcomed, staff appeared to grow increasingly skeptical of the government's ideological underpinning. The framing of disadvantage, combined with the emphasis on employment, rather than quality employment (or employment under the appropriate conditions) led staff to question the overall commitment of the Government to its own Agenda:

. . . if we take Julia Gillard's most recent speeches, if you looked at that at face value you would say . . . that's a death knell for social inclusion because there was nothing consistent in there about social inclusion principles. It was really opposite to it. [B08]

So in a sense you've got to think that it's probably not so much social inclusion is the issue, it's more about the government's capacity and willingness to stick to some of its core principles as a way for government to address some of these issues around inequality and poverty and so forth. [B08]

These questions, raised by public debate, persisted despite the existence of visible governance reforms, such as the Social Inclusion Unit and Social Inclusion Board. Like St Martha's, Swithin's staff argued that there were no implementation mechanisms:

the rhetoric in the external environment, and that's all we've got to go on. [B08]

Reflections from Policymakers

While the third sector has been given unprecedented policy attention under the SIA—aimed at promoting engagement and collaboration with the sector—policymakers felt that governance structures set in place around the SIA soured the relationships between the two sectors. In particular, they suggested that the establishment of bodies such as the Social Inclusion Board acted to raise the expectations of the third sector beyond what could be met.

The Social Inclusion Unit and Board were placed in Prime Minister and Cabinet as a symbolic gesture—to give the Agenda "clout" and demonstrate the government's commitment (e.g. "Gillard's office wanted it to be in Prime Minister and Cabinet so that it would be important [G04]," "you want it within to get the attention of the PM, and that's why you put it in that department" [G04]). However, policymakers felt the creation of these structures generated a gap between the expectations of nongovernment organizations and the capacity of government to deliver:

The establishment of the Social Inclusion Board and the Social Inclusion Unit, sent a message to the NGO sector that they thought big things would happen. When you work in NGOs and you don't work in government, you have this view (because I've been there) that if the Prime Minister says 'We're establishing this, they're going to give us advice', you expect action. But the politics are that the Social Inclusion Board is a board for advice and they provide advice to government and government have to take it in the context of everything else, they have to take it in the context of other pressures, of fiscal pressures and so they may respond immediately, but they may not.

So that is the tension between the expectations of the non-government sector and the capability of the government sector to actually respond as quickly as they want them to do. [G01]

I think the community and the sector had very high expectations about what the government could deliver. I think they were pretty unrealistic. [G02]

The Social Inclusion Board and Unit—and their placement within Prime Minister and Cabinet—was designed to signal a political commitment. However, these symbolic gestures placed policymakers in a difficult position, creating what were perceived to be unreasonably high expectations.

The response of a system to an innovation is shaped by the state of readiness that exists, or the *tension for change*, within a system (Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Rogers, 2003). If potential adopters feel that the current situation is intolerable, an innovation is more likely to be viewed favorably. The previous government neglected social policy issues, such as disadvantage and inclusion (Reddel, 2002), which meant that nongovernment organization had seen little positive discussion or commitment to social policy reform for over a decade. As a result, nongovernment organizations became “dangerously over-excited” at the prospect of reform [G02].

Specifically, policymakers were concerned that an increase in funding and rapid change were viewed as possible and plausible by the sector:

Non-government sector has a very narrow view on the ‘I’ve made this recommendation and I want this fixed’ and the government takes that in the context of this view and may respond wholly, partly or not at all, so that’s the tension and it is quite difficult. [G04]

They argued that there had been successes, but social inclusion and reduced social inequalities required policymaking for the long-term and incremental change:

Expectations were high, really raised high and delivering on that was quite hard . . . and it takes time. As we said before it’s about long-term change and structural adjustment . . . [G02]

I feel optimistic that we’ll be able to do some good stuff, but it’ll be incremental steps . . . it’s all incremental change. [G03]

Policymakers appeared spurned by a lack of recognition regarding the complex processes that had been negotiated in order to secure “incremental change”:

They could have used the Agenda themselves more effectively. So the big church-based agencies could’ve got around together and said, ‘this is the ticket we’re going to use and run with,’ and they haven’t. [G06]

From the perspective of policymakers, the SIA struggled to unite government and nongovernment sectors in a shared vision for change.

DISCUSSION

The aim of policy narratives is to paint a grand and aspirational vision of reform—one aimed at sweeping up policy actors in a united vision of the future (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Bills, 2001). Similarly, the placement of interdepartmental working groups in high-profile departments, such as Prime Minister and Cabinet, was described by policymakers as a symbolic gesture to signal significant political commitment.

While the literature indicates that this type of mandate for change is critical to the success of joined-up initiatives, in the case of the SIA it created high expectations amongst those outside of government, which policymakers felt they were unable to meet.

The speed and extent of change anticipated by the two case study organizations is at odds with how change actually takes place in institutions and organizations. The duality of structure—or the recursive relationship between action and structure—indicates that change emerges as “conventions become subtly modified in and through the ways they are adhered to by actors” (Parker, 2000, p. 60). As a result, change is “usually incremental . . . a slow drift away from a given practice or set of practices” (Giddens, 1990, p. 304). This incremental image of innovation and change within government is supported by a recent work by Considine, Lewis, and Alexander (2009). In their social network approach to researching the nature of innovation in institutions, they suggest that innovation in these contexts is more likely to emerge from “habituated methodologies” (Considine et al., 2009, p. 4). Rather than “breakthroughs” and “paradigm changing” ideas, change emerges from gradual shifts in practice.

Empirical work on organizational innovation suggests that the implementation and adoption of process-based innovations within organizations is characterized by a movement back and forth between initiation, development, and implementation (Van de Ven et al., 1989; see also Greenhalgh et al., 2004). This means that change is slow to take place, and there is often a shifting back and forth between existing new practices (Van de Ven et al., 1989). However, individuals at both Swithin’s and St Martha’s became disenchanted by what they saw as insufficient and inconsistent change under the SIA, undermining their efforts to create joined-up programs at the local level. In both organizations, workers expressed confusion and disappointment over a perceived lack of change within government, and questioned the government’s commitment to the Agenda. In contrast, policymakers felt that change was occurring but it was complex and difficult. This disjuncture between perceived, or expected, and actual change undermined the implementation of the SIA.

This finding supports the existing literature, which suggests that top-down mechanisms are insufficient on their own for creating change at lower levels. However, diffusion of innovations theory tells us that the implications of failing to effectively communicate policy reforms are more extensive than diminished outcomes from a specific reform.

In order to create change within the diverse contexts in which policy is now implemented—such as nongovernment organizations—government’s, as change agents, need to have what is referred to in the diffusion of innovations literature as safety credibility (Rogers, 2003). That is, the source of change needs to be perceived as trustworthy for individuals, or organizations, to change their behavior and adopt

the “innovation.” The experiences of the two case study organizations examined in this research indicate that the weak implementation of the SIA reduced trust between nongovernment organizations and government. For St Martha’s, the SIA reinforced their perceptions that policies “come and go,” and attempts at implementation are waste of resources. Similarly, when the type and rate of change expected under the SIA failed to be met, Swithin’s staff felt that the government was unable to stick to its principles. Diffusion of innovations research indicates that this reduced trust will hamper future reform efforts (Rogers, 2003).

The Australian not-for-profit sector has complex and difficult history with government(s). The ways in which governments interact with, fund, and regulate nongovernment organizations has been a contentious issue (Butcher, 2011; Onyx, 2008). Throughout the 1990s, contracting processes were established in the public services that saw nongovernment organizations compete to fill gaps in the welfare state (Casey & Dalton, 2006; Staples, 2008). These approaches to funding have had a significant impact on the sector’s internal and external functioning (Lyons, 2003; Melville, 2008). For example, the top-down accountability and government-imposed targets found within the contracting model often decreased organizational autonomy, which in some instances diminished the ability of organizations to carry out work intended to address disadvantage and inequality, such as advocacy work and representing marginalized social groups (Carey, Riley, & Crammond, 2012; Casey & Dalton, 2006). Tensions between the two sectors peaked in the mid-2000s when the conservative Howard Government placed damaging gag clauses into contracts in order to inhibit the advocacy functions of the sector and prevent them speaking out against policies that impact the poor (Melville, 2008).

These tensions mean that in the eyes of nongovernment organizations, government(s) already lack safety credibility. The implementation experiences of the SIA appear to have reinforced these tensions, building distrust amongst nongovernment organizations and frustrating policymakers. This has serious consequences for future reform efforts, and can be seen in recent consultations for a new joined-up approach to service provision in the state of Victoria, which echoes many of the principles of the SIA. The Service Sector Reform consultation report notes that trust between the sectors is pivotal to the implementation of joined-up reform efforts, but found that distrust is currently widespread (Shergold, 2013). The report also draws attention to reform-fatigue within the nongovernment sector (Shergold, 2013, p. 15). As previously noted, the status of an innovation affects its spread and uptake. By undermining the status of joined-up approaches and reducing the government’s safety credibility, the SIA has the potential to derail the adoption of future policies. This is of particular importance given that relationships have been found to be a key ingredient to the sustainability of joined-up initiatives (Powell, 1990).

Research on joined-up government has noted that it is difficult for top-down approaches to reach the lower levels of policy networks and generate change. Joined-up scholars recommend against using top-down measures in isolation (Keast, 2011). The research presented in this article suggests that the implications of doing so are more far-reaching than previously thought. Joined-up government initiatives can create high expectations within policy networks. When these are not met, the resulting frustration and disappointment impedes trust between government and nongovernment sectors—creating reform fatigue and impacting the likely uptake of future reform efforts.

Emerging research has drawn attention to the need for strategies to targeted multiple levels and use a wide variety of strategies for change. In particular, joined-up initiatives that use both top-down and local-level mechanisms have been found to be most successful (O’Flynn et al., 2011; Ross et al., 2011): “Successful joined-up approaches draw from top-down and bottom-up models to shape hybrid arrangements which draw on the strengths of both, thus forming new models” (Keast, 2011, p. 229). Mechanisms for creating integration at the local level include: establishing shared problems, seeking agreed solutions, intersectoral planning, and interagency models (Keast, 2011). Alongside these bottom-up methods, integration can be encouraged from the top through funding and incentives and the creation of a culture that values joined-up working.

CONCLUSION

By examining the implementation experiences of the Australian SIA, this research has shown that weak implementation of joined-up government reforms can limit the effectiveness of both current and future reform efforts. If joined-up initiatives are poorly implemented, they undermine what is known as the safety credibility of governments (Rogers, 2003), feeding distrust between government and nongovernment actors. This means that when new joined-up reforms are launched, they are unlikely to be given the requisite attention by nongovernment actors. To overcome this, top-down approaches need to be paired with bottom-up mechanisms for integration, including intersectoral planning. As Keast (2011) notes, successful joined-up initiatives need to draw on both top-down and bottom-up models, in order to create new fit-for-purpose approaches.

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