OVERVIEW

TROPICO is a research project in the field of public administration, running from June 2017 to November 2021. **TROPICO investigates how public administrations are transformed into open, innovative, and collaborative governments.**

A better understanding of this transformation and its drivers, barriers, and effects, may enhance collaboration in policy design and service delivery, thereby advancing the participation of citizens, as well as public, private, and societal actors. The development of new digital tools and the process of digitalisation offer new prospects for collaboration, innovation, and openness, potentially producing more efficient, transparent, and effective governments. In our research, we analyse collaboration both in and by governments, with a special emphasis on the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), and its consequences.

**Research focus**

- Understanding government collaboration in policy design and service delivery
- Identifying drivers and barriers of collaboration
- Studying innovative collaboration practices
- Examining e-participation and digital tools for collaboration
- Assessing the effects of collaboration on accountability, legitimacy, and efficiency

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Understanding collaboration in policy design and service delivery

TROPICO takes a broad view on collaboration and looks at collaboration and collaborative governance both within government (internal collaboration) and between the government and actors outside the public sector (external collaboration).

Strengthening collaboration and engaging with a broad range of stakeholders is widely recognised as a key recipe for improving policies and public sector services. Collaborative arrangements are said to create more innovation as well as more democratic, agile, adaptive, and efficient governments. Collaboration is especially seen to be a promising avenue for dealing with transboundary, cross-cutting policy problems, thus enhancing government’s ability to reach diverse policy goals and provide better public services.

Our research on the rules and regulation of collaboration between governments and societal actors indicates that there is considerable diversity in the interpretations of the term “collaborative governance” across the European countries, and that the term as such is a fuzzy concept worth exploring (WP2).

Rapid technological developments have led to an increased use of digital tools with the aim to enhance collaboration in and by governments. Digital tools have the potential for improving transparency and communication, as well as bringing relevant actors together and increasing their involvement in policy design and service delivery. These innovative and increasingly digital collaboration practices can work as drivers and barriers in public administration, and may also contribute to the legitimacy and effectiveness of governments, thereby ultimately strengthening democracy.

Drivers and barriers

Our research shows that challenges in collaborative projects often arise from a lack of general information and knowledge on how to collaborate, how collaboration structures and processes work, and a lack of knowledge of essential drivers and barriers for collaboration.

Formal rules, embedded in administrative traditions, reform trajectories, and governmental and state structures regulate collaborative behaviour, and may facilitate and drive collaboration. Leadership, management, and political support, as well as careful design, long term commitment, mutual trust, and shared knowledge are also important drivers for collaboration.

Structural barriers related to legal constraints and formal obligations, missing or unclear performance measures, and lacking resources both in terms of budget but also human capital may hinder collaboration. On the individual level, selective perceptions due to different organisational affiliations or individual characteristics may create blind spots, risk aversiveness, or inaction (WP3). The availability of technology and technological competence are other significant factors that affect collaboration.

The composition and characteristics of the participating partners in a collaboration is also important. The partners’ resources, knowledge and experiences are crucial. Different understandings among the partners in a collaboration may result in different perceptions of problems, strategies, and solutions – including the steps required in the collaboration process. Trust among the involved partners is always an important factor.

Institutional conditions

To investigate the importance of institutional conditions and administrative traditions, both formal and informal,
and see how they can affect the motivation, power, and possibility actions of different actors in the collaboration, the TROPICO research covers ten European countries.

Public sector reforms, including those emphasising the importance of increased collaboration, collaborative governance, and joined up government, have spread widely in European countries during the late 20th and early 21st century. Existing public administration research has found that some national bureaucracies rely on detailed rules, including strongly regulated administrative processes, while other are relatively free to pursue and interpret new goals. TROPICO finds that collaboration is relatively under-regulated in most European countries, despite an increased focus on the importance of such collaboration in recent years.

Codes of collaboration vary with country contexts and administrative traditions. Nevertheless, these regulations are also influenced by new ideas about collaboration and open government, and fuelled by increasing digitalisation and the advancement of new digital ICT tools. The development of data protection and data sharing regulations, as well as legislation concerning “freedom of information” is also crucial, as such regulation determines if and to what extent information sharing is possible.

→ Examining e-participation

E-participation refers to ICT-supported participation in processes involving government and citizens. With greater engagement via e-participation, the expectation is that government decision-making will be better informed and democratic processes enhanced.

However, our research uncovers that the level of citizen participation when using government e-participation platforms has largely remained limited. Higher levels of participation, that is, ensuring both collaboration and empowerment of citizens in the collaboration, is required to ensure that citizens’ feedback is actually incorporated. The ideal should be to enable citizens to become genuine producers and not only consumers of policies. Such involvement is then more likely to increase trust, accountability, and ultimately ensure better policies and services.

TROPICO also identifies a need to reach out to different groups of citizens. Citizens are often not aware of the opportunities that e-participation platforms offer. Low participation rates may lead to a vicious cycle where the results of e-participation processes are not used by decision-makers because too few citizens participate.

Furthermore, our research finds that citizens who contribute on e-participation platforms often do not know how their input is being dealt with or how the eventual decision is made. Many e-participation platforms lack systems for providing (systematic) feedback to their users, a trend resulting from previous established organisational culture and priorities set by managers. Limited feedback can may reduce citizens’ trust, not only in the specific e-participation platform, but also in participatory democracy in general.
What’s next?

The TROPICO project now turns to the effects of collaboration (WP8 and WP9). First, we explore the impact of collaborative governance practices on democratic legitimacy and accountability relations in existing literature and research, and through case studies at the local level. Second, we examine to what extent increased collaboration holds the promise of creating a more efficient public sector, by examining collaborations and best practices in shared services.

TROPICO is also developing a set of criteria-based assessment indicators that can be used to measure the legitimacy and efficiency of different collaborations. The indicators will be integrated in a Collaboration Monitor – an online self-assessment tool that will enable organisations engaged in collaborative practices of the production or delivery of public services to compare and improve on key characteristics of efficiency and legitimacy.

ONLINE RESOURCES

The project’s website offers access to all scientific results, research reports, policy briefs, and article publications, as well as tools for further interaction.

It includes a blog featuring insights from the project and a newsletter (subscribe online) with highlights from the project activities.

You can also follow us on Twitter: @tropico_project.

A description of the project and the consortium is available in the TROPICO leaflet and in the Policy Brief: Introduction to TROPICO.

Policy recommendations

The TROPICO policy briefs provide important results in an accessible format and include:

- recommendations for policy and practice to enhance innovation through public-private collaboration
- recommendations and success factors for organising and administering e-participation
- recommendations and success factors to policy-makers and public managers in charge of designing and implementing digitalisation strategies
- recommendations for European governments regarding effective policymaking and support for ICT tools, for enhancing innovative and collaborative policy design

Tools

‘Codes of Collaboration’

TROPICO has collected relevant rules for collaboration in several European countries, to show how collaboration is regulated across multiple areas of governance and public administration. The overview and access provided by the collection of codes of collaboration can provide users with a better understanding of the societal, cultural, and administrative unity and diversity in Europe. The selection is available on our website.

Case studies

The research in TROPICO includes case studies from ten European countries on various dynamics and aspects of collaboration and the digital transformation of public administrations. In order to provide accessible facts on collaboration practices for policy design and service delivery, our case study repository provides access to all the empirical case studies in a condensed format.