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Governing Collaboratively

I recently attended a meeting at which I was asked to describe the activities of the Institute. Not wanting to offer a laundry list litany of the “We are doing this, we are doing that” variety, I strove instead to discern a common strand across several projects in which we are now engaged. I settled on suggesting that many of our efforts are concerned with the challenges and dynamics of governing collaboratively. At one level, this may sound like a banal truism since democratic governance, by definition, demands coalition building and at least a modicum of civic engagement. But that is hardly the whole story. Under the sway of neoliberal calls for increasing the role of markets to secure economic development and a companion deep popular suspicion of a national government perceived to have overreached and to have failed in its efforts in Vietnam and to secure the Great Society, the United States has led much of the rest of the world for several decades in adopting forms of governance that demand that public actors undertake a broad share of their actions with and through the for-profit and/or nonprofit sectors.

At its root, this phenomenon is essentially paradoxical as it is born of a broad collective desire to undertake government actions and services that exists alongside a fundamental insecurity in the appropriateness and often, likely efficacy, of such action. Lawmakers, reflecting deep public ambivalence, demand that government work through other sectoral actors to secure the perceived benefits of their engagement in policy implementation: increased efficiency and effectiveness due to less “waste, fraud, abuse and bureaucracy,” heightened legitimacy and representation and perceived lower costs. The result of these competing and conflicted public values and narratives, however, has been a remarkably byzantine structure of governance whose very hybridized character, whatever its potential advantages, has made democratically accountable governance far more difficult to achieve.

Wherever one turns in policymaking domains with which we are engaged here at VTIPG, one encounters the reality of this phenomenon. In our work in social welfare and health care policy for example, at bottom, we see a nation struggling to develop a framework of private action and public support that results in adequate social action and treatment opportunities as well as individual initiative. The complex forms of social support and policy implementation in these areas mirror the public’s deeply conflicted values on the rightful role of government and market. The result has been breathtakingly complex public policy and broad popular disaffection amid cries for increased service effectiveness and accountability. Similarly, in disaster relief and mitigation, scholars and public officials alike have argued that effective response cannot occur unless organizations and actors in all three sectors are actively engaged. But hurricanes Katrina and Gustav have revealed again how difficult it is to elicit and sustain such cooperation and to make complex intersectoral governance structures work effectively and equitably. In this policy domain too, there are shrill calls in and out of government for greater accountability, and restiveness over the relative efficacy of publicly led action. The

same is surely true for efforts to secure effective responses to ongoing environmental pollution and climate change. Community resilience demands the engagement of actors from all sectors of the political economy in environmental public policy implementation, but ideological disagreements over the rightful role and reach of government and the resulting mind-numbingly complex forms of regulation and service delivery have made progress uneven in this domain, with conflicts and suspicions running deep among all parties.

These examples might be multiplied but they suggest that our current intricate forms of policy implementation that demand and depend upon intersectoral-cooperation reflect a polity deeply conflicted in its estimation of the appropriate role and reach of government action. But wide awareness of this fact and the healthy debate that might accompany popular recognition of the multi-faceted forms of governance it has wrought has not yet occurred. Instead, public officials deal with structures of action that demand complicated and collaborative forms of action amid competing incentives and values while the broader citizenry grows ever more impatient over how difficult it appears to be to attain policy results and transparent and accountable government action.

It is hard not to conclude that while it is important for researchers and public officials to seek to do all they can to make collaborative governance structures work as effectively as possible—exploring the dynamics of alternate organizational structures, forms of leadership and types of conflict management strategies, for example—it is still more vital that they seek to develop a thoroughgoing public conversation on the governance structures that our collective and conflicted values have created. It is equally necessary for the citizenry to develop patience as their governments struggle to find ways and means not only to realize their demands for collaborative governance structures, but also to do so in ways that can conduce to democratic accountability and outcomes. There is much work to do on all of these concerns to which our ongoing research and capacity building projects here at the Institute can surely contribute.