



Project

2.1 Policy Experiments in Adaptation Governance and how they Facilitate Learning.

Description of research

Social-ecological system dynamics render modern environmental issues complex and highly uncertain and a learning approach is needed to build an effective governance response (Newig and Pahl-Wostl, 2010). Policy experiments are touted as a useful tool for producing policy relevant information that decreases uncertainty and helps manage system complexity (Folke et al 2005) but neither their institutional design nor their potential as “learning incubators” has been studied in a governance context.

It is broadly hypothesised that a policy experiment’s institutional properties (such as participation diversity, information flow, and power distribution) have an impact on learning in the context of governance of social-ecological systems. This project investigates just how much influence design has on learning effects and whether enhanced learning leads to the policy experiment having more influence in the policy domain.



Research question

How can policy experiments contribute effectively to decision making for policy issues that are complex and highly uncertain?

The most important conclusions

How design processes influence learning:

Information transmission

- 1) information shared equally to ensure all participants are privy to all knowledge;

Diverse participant types

- 1) both scientific and non-scientific knowledge can be captured;
- 2) ensures a range of perspectives;
- 3) heightens legitimacy for the proposal if affected parties are involved.

Authority to challenge norms

- 1) ability of participants to share and challenge assumptions

Enhanced interaction and contribution

- 1) participants have authority over design and evaluation of experiment

Possible applications from the project

- The most practical application is the use of the recommendations for policy makers to design future policy experiments. It is hypothesised that certain design choices will render particular learning effects, with context also playing a part. The outcomes of this project will be useful for policy makers who want to experiment but are not sure of a) the institutional design choices available to them, and b) what the impact of those design choices will be on learning.
- The project will also have a useful theoretical application, in that learning will be analysed quantitatively, testing typical theoretical assumptions found in the learning literature.

Kennis voor Klimaat

Knowledge for Climate



Bottlenecks of the project

- The concepts I work with are diffuse and difficult to precisely define. Learning is applied in so many disciplines with no real common thread of meaning that it can be all and nothing. Operationalising and measuring it is even more *lastig*.
- Policy experiments too are not defined concretely, and often they come by another term- pilot project, field experiment, quasi-experiment. I chose policy experiment because I wanted to capture the element of trial, testing, openness to failure. The experiment also must be relevant to policy making, hence the qualifier “policy”.
- Although in theory policy makers like experimenting, in reality there are so many political issues. They even employ a phrase- no regrets experimenting- where if there is any chance it can go wrong, then don't do it. Obviously this doesn't really help you learn anything.



Opportunities for the project

- There is an opportunity to do internationally comparative work with two other European countries that I am excited about.
- We shall see what else comes up, but policy experiments and evidence-based policy making is quite hot right now in the media, e.g. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/27/opinion/brooks-is-our-adults-learning.html?_r=2
So at least I am investigating an interesting topic ☺.

More information

For more information about this project please contact
Belinda McFadgen
Institute for Environment Studies, VU University
b.k.mcfadgen@vu.nl

