

Learning, wicked problems and multi-level government

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Abstract

The growing political science literature on wicked policy problems and multi-level government typically studies challenges related to coordination and democratic accountability. Without disputing the importance of these phenomena, this paper argues that the wicked issues literature should pay more attention to the learning aspect of policymaking: knowledge production, knowledge dissemination, and experience-based policy learning. And vice versa: The literature on learning in organizations and policy subsystems should pay more attention to learning in wicked problem processes. The limited dialogue between these literatures is surprising given that the need for information and learning must be assumed to extraordinarily high in awkwardly structured policy subsystems and issues with wicked characteristics. This paper discusses how prerequisites of ideal learning are challenged by characteristics of wicked problems and multi-level governance: the absence of shared problem frames within the policy subsystem, underdeveloped means-ends understandings, few common interests, limits on opportunities for information exchange and reflection, and lack of commitment to policy goals and improvement. Based on the theoretical exposition the paper formulates expectations about learning processes within three policy sectors in Norway – settlement of refugees, regional research policy, and urban development policy.

Keywords:

Learning; Wicked problems; Multi-level governance; Knowledge.

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Introduction

The starting point of this paper is twofold. First, we observe that there is an increased number of policy programs that share three characteristics: (i) they seek to handle wicked policy issues, (ii) they are shaped and implemented in multi-level government settings, and (iii) processes for policy learning are of key importance for their policy effectiveness – perhaps more important than are instruments and processes of top-down control. Second, we observe that relevant literatures – public administration, public management, and organizational theory – do pay attention to these characteristics, but all three are seldom considered at once. We believe this limit the prospects for scholarly advice of value to real-world designers of policy programs, since, as we will argue, the combined presence of wicked issues and multi-level government produces learning challenges neither produce alone.

“Wicked problems” has become a buzzword in political science and related literatures. A great deal of attention has been paid, for example, to coordination of policy issues cutting across policy areas, departmental lines, and levels of management. Strains of research dealing with the question of coordination are commonly known as whole-of-government (Christensen & Lægreid 2007), or joined-up government (Bogdanor 2005; Pollitt 2003), and concern how new organizational structures and procedural arrangements are implemented to improve coherence and coordination in cabinet level policymaking.

The concept of learning has also been of long-standing interest to political science scholars and organisational theorists. The learning literature addresses a rich plethora of issues. Remarkably, however, there has been limited focus on learning in situations characterized by wicked issues.

Inasmuch as multi-actor arrangements have been seen as suited for dealing with wicked problems, some highlight how networks function as arenas promoting inter-organizational learning (Ferlie et al. 2011; Provan & Kenis 2007). In a network there might be ‘effective transfer, receipt, and integration of knowledge across the participants in the network’ (Weber & Khademian 2008: 337). In the literature on multi-level governance, the EU is seen as a learning organization spreading knowledge and lessons about various policy instruments (Radaelli 2009). The literature on environmental and climate change has similarly underlined how polycentric systems might enhance learning and adaptation. Contrary to a monocentric system, polycentric systems are characterized by multiple governing

authorities at differing scales (Ostrom 2010). According to Ostrom participants in a polycentric system have the advantage of learning from others who are also engaged in trial-and-error learning processes (2010: 552). Mechanisms for learning and adaptation of better strategies over time might also provide considerable advantages (ibid).

In part the growing literature on new forms of accountability also relates to the concept of learning. Some see accountability as a tool to make the executive branch learn, and to make governments and agencies more effective in delivering what they have promised (Bovens et al. 2008: 232). Accountability mechanisms purportedly induce openness and reflexivity in political and administrative systems, and may provide a setting for dialogue about performance feedback (Bovens et al. 2008: 233). Schillemans argues that accountability arrangements stimulate learning, as they force power-holders to reflect upon their behaviour, and such reflection stimulates learning (2012: 180).

This paper is an exposition of existing knowledge and research challenges concerning the tripod of wicked issues, multi-level government and policy learning. Learning as experience-based reflection and adaptation is an important part of the decision-making process. It must be assumed that learning is complicated in awkwardly structured policy subsystems dealing with issues having “wicked” characteristics: problem framing may be blurred, and means-ends relationships are likely to be opaque. Within a multi-level system there is added complexity, and learning might be challenged by the absence of common goals and interests. Policy learning might also be hindered by the lack of arenas for information exchange and policy owners’ lacking will to improve.

The paper first elaborates on prerequisites for learning in general. It is then shown how the nature of wicked issues and multi-level government adds challenges to learning processes; appending these characteristics render some generic prerequisites for learning unsustainable. Finally, the paper illustrates the relevance of the theoretical argument by formulating expectations about learning processes within three policy sectors in Norway – settlement of refugees, regional research policy and urban development policy. This explication serves to illustrate various elements of the theoretical discussion and provides a framework for further empirical analysis. The conclusion from the paper is that the wicked issues literature should pay more attention to knowledge production, knowledge dissemination and experience-based

policy learning. Understanding why learning processes are challenged might help explain why some policy problems fail to be managed effectively.

Definitions of learning

The concept of learning can be defined in various ways (Bennett & Howlett 1992). A minimal definition of learning is adaptation or alteration in behaviour that results from experience (Hecló 1974; Olsen & Peters 1996). Learning processes, however, might vary according to the scope of change. Learning as adaptation or alteration in behaviour might therefore be a too strict definition, since learning processes does not necessarily imply change. As argued by Argyris (2003), learning may refer both to situations where new knowledge change perceptions but not behaviour per se, and to situations where such cognitive changes also are manifested in changed behaviour.

The distinction made between single and double loop (Argyris & Schön 1996) is well known. In single-loop learning processes, entities compare expected and obtained outcomes, and may change their behaviour, either by reviewing their goals and ambitions or by applying different means. There might be incremental improvement of actions without the underlying values and assumptions being questioned (Pahl-Wostl 2009). Aspiration-level learning (Cyert & March 1963) and goal-based learning (Moynihan 2005) refer to the same broad phenomenon. In double-loop learning processes, experience makes entities question the assumptions that led to the actions in the first place (Argyris & Schön 1996: 21). Problems as well as the strategies used are considered in a different way. In triple loop learning even the underlying values are changed. The whole way of seeing and thinking of the policy problem is altered. These three loops, or scopes of learning might be seen as improving, reframing, and transforming policy (Pahl-Wostl 2009). While policy programs might be improved and even reframed, the process of transforming is probably quite rare in real world politics.

Meta learning (Argyris & Schön 1996) and deuterio learning (Bateson 1972) are slightly different concepts, both of which emphasize ‘learning how to learn’ processes. While learning (single or double loop) involves the detection and correction of error, meta-learning implies reflecting on and inquiring into the process in which single-loop and double loop learning take place. As stated by Visser (2007: 663): “Reflecting on the process of single-loop learning involves thinking about ways to improve error detection and correction and, thus, to improve the effectiveness of

action strategies. Reflecting on the process of double-loop learning involves thinking about ways to improve discussion about norms and values underlying action strategies”.

Learning also varies according to the actors involved – who it is that learns, in other words (Bennett & Howlett 1992). The learning entities might either be individuals, groups or organizations (Levitt & March 1988). According to Bennett and Howlett, the all-encompassing concept of policy learning consists of how state officials, policy networks, and policy communities learn about organizations, programs, and policies (1992: 289). In a slightly different vein, Peter May (1992) distinguishes between instrumental learning and social learning as two forms of policy learning. Whereas instrumental learning is about the viability and effect of policy instruments and tools, social learning happens at various political and social arenas, and changes the perception of the policy problem (May 1992).²

Much emphasis in the literature has been put on learning processes in organizations. Conceptually, a learning cycle within a policy program will typically involve program owner, for instance a ministry in charge, a policy program, consisting of policy ambitions and policy instruments, and various implementers. After implementation, experiences are gathered and disseminated, and the program owner uses feedback about the effects as a basis for redesigning or adjusting the program’s contents. If a policy program fails to realize its targets, the program owner may introduce other instruments associated with presumably higher certainty of delivery, even if that means the program becomes less flexible and allows less choice of action for implementers and for the target group (Levine et al. 1990, quoted in Birkland 2011: 250). If the program is still ineffective, program owners may choose to lower their policy ambitions.

The learning cycle rests on some preconditions, or ideal requirements for program-level learning. Prospects for learning are presumably best when the following conditions pertain:

1. Well known problem framing and clear policy objectives
2. Well understood means-ends relationships
3. A unitary actor and common interests

² May (1992) also adds political learning as processes where policymakers learn about what is feasible, to become more refined in promoting special interests.

4. Existence of learning arenas
5. Commitment to policy goals and improvement

Some of these requirements relates to the nature of the policy issue, others relate to the actors involved and the environments in which they operate. As the following discussion will demonstrate, these conditions are challenged in various ways by the nature of wicked issues and multi-level government.

Learning and wicked problems

After being introduced in the planning debates of the early 1970s, the concept of wicked problems has become increasingly popular. Wicked problems challenge established political-administrative structures, and are surrounded by a complex policy subsystem (Rittel & Webber 1973). Wicked problems are policy issues that cut across policy areas, departmental lines, and levels of management, such as poverty, climate change, national security etc. Looking at learning in the context of wicked issues, it is clear how several of the preconditions for policy learning are challenged.

Learning prerequisite 1: Problem framing and policy objectives

Wicked problems are characterised by the absence of a common accepted problem frame within the policy system (Rittel & Webber 1973; Rein & Schön 1994). Instead there is a situation “in which there is a multiplicity of frames, each emphasizing different aspects of a problem situation that are often contradictory” (Poppelaars & Scholten 2008: 338, referring to Fischer 2003). As multiple understandings and frames exists, accurate and relevant feedback about the effects and results of the policy program will be more difficult to obtain.

As underlined by several scholars, knowledge can be contextual and situated, for instance inside an organisation or a firm. In the words of Weber and Khademian: “Knowledge must be understood in the context of practice that is situated in a geographic setting, a particular point in time, or within a particular set of relationships (2008: 339). When thinking about learning within a policy program, it is essential to spread the gathered information upwards to all program owners and decision-makers. To meet the difficulties of multiple understandings when disseminating knowledge upwards, common language or standardised reporting routines may be developed.

Collecting information about effects and consequences might also be challenged by the fact that problem severity and the whole understanding of the problem may fluctuate over time (Weber & Khademeian 2008). New knowledge and evolving solutions might change the understanding of the problem. Such challenges have been apparent e.g. in the field of environment and climate change.

Learning processes are also challenged by the fact that policy objectives can be unclear. According to Rittel and Webber (1973), with wicked problems there are often no reliable criteria by which to assess the success of different instruments. Thus, when dealing with wicked problems it may be difficult for policy owners to judge whether or not the policy program reaches its objectives and learning by experience is therefore not readily available.

When it is unclear what actually happened, it resembles what March and Olsen have called experiential learning under ambiguity (1975). In their model of choice in organizations, the circle of decision-makers' beliefs, actions, and environmental response, can be broken at several places, leading to what March and Olsen (1975) call incomplete learning.³ With experiential learning under ambiguity the environment has changed, but events are only seen dimly and therefore fail to affect the actors' beliefs at decision-making level.

Learning prerequisite 2: Well understood means-ends relationships

Furthermore wicked problems are often characterised by underdeveloped means-ends relationships. The means-ends relationship might be poorly understood at the decision-making level simply because there is uncertainty about what the best way is to solve complex challenges. Policy learning is difficult when program owners are uncertain about which policy instruments to choose to meet program ambitions and to achieve program goals.

Means-ends relationship can also be challenged by the fact that within wicked policy issues responsibility often exceeds authority, and the management of wicked problems might exceed established political-administrative structures. Program

³ March and Olsen (1975) actually distinguish between individual action and organisational action in their model. The threefold of beliefs, action, and response is a simplification, and in March and Olsen's original model the circle of choice can therefore be broken at several places. Role and standard operating procedures can restrain changed individual beliefs to lead to new individual decisions. March and Olsen call this role-constrained experiential learning. If new individual decisions do not affect the organisational decisions, we have what has been called audience experiential learning.

owners, in other words, may not control the full set of policy instruments, although they have responsibility. This may also challenge the process of policy learning, inasmuch as information gathered in one part of the decision-making system might fail to reach other parts, or interpreted differently by senders and receivers of messages.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attack in Norway in 2011, some of these challenges were highlighted in the official July 22nd Commission report. The Ministry of Justice's responsibility to coordinate homeland security stretches across lines of responsibility created by the principle of ministerial responsibility. The Commission report found that the ministry had been cautious to instruct other actors to avoid blurring the lines of responsibility (NOU 2012: 78). The commission report urged that constitutional responsibility should not become a barrier for other ministries to raise various concerns (NOU 2012: 444).

If a program owner adjusts the program's contents on the basis of feedback, but revised or new instruments still fail to affect environments, we might have a case of what March and Olsen (1975) labelled superstitious experiential learning⁴. Action is modified in what is thought to be an appropriate fashion, but the changed "behavior does not affect the consequences significantly" (March & Olsen 1975: 159). Superstitious learning understood as misinterpretations and incorrect conclusions about the need of adjusted instruments is likely to occur in the face of unclear means-ends relationships often found within wicked problems. Underdeveloped means-ends relationships would seem to fit poorly with the growing emphasis on evidence-based policy making observed for instance in the UK in recent decades (Sanderson 2009).

Learning and multi-level government

In multi-level government systems, responsibilities for making and implementing policies are shared between actors situated on two or more of the following levels: international, national, regional, and local levels. Moving decision-making competences upwards to international level or downwards to regional and local levels make political management and accountability more complex.

In central-local relations much emphasis has been put on power, performance and control. Learning processes have received less attention, although some exceptions

⁴ Superstitious learning is the fourth way of breaking the learning circle in institutions, according to March and Olsen (1975)

exist – for instance contributions underlining the importance of developing local learning cultures (Sanderson 2001). As we have already seen, the nature of wicked problems can breach preconditions for policy learning. Looking more closely at multi-level government systems it becomes clear that other prerequisites for policy learning are also challenged.

Learning prerequisite 3: A unitary actor and common interests

Most learning theory focuses on unitary actors, probably due to the heritage from organizational theory. In multi-level government systems, however, there is a web of several actors. Theories on policy networks have relevance here, but such networks are typically of a more voluntary character than that which prevails in multi-level government relations. Thus, in conceptualizing policy learning, the assumption of a single policy owner, for instance a ministry, must be relaxed, as there are several de facto policy owners in multi-level government systems.

These policy owners, moreover, do not necessarily share a common interest in the policy program. Rather, several different and perhaps conflicting interests and motives may pertain. Following the principle of subsidiarity, local and regional actors may be given decision-making competences even though the policy issues in question are part of larger national or international policy areas. Not only is the situation characterized by multiple actors, it is quite reasonable to presume that these actors may have divergent understandings of the policy problem and different sets of priorities when they first confront the issue. Bringing together differing perspectives may enrich the basis for information exchange and experiential learning, but there is no guarantee that there will be a common frame of reference and uniform understanding of the policy objectives. The opposite is just as, if not more, likely.

To what degree the policy issue is characterized by top-down as opposed to bottom-up policymaking, will also affect the prospects of learning. This consideration may be something of a double edged sword that can cut either way. On the one hand, insofar as bottom-up policy formation offers a type of trial-and-error policy process, it will presumably generate a broader base of relevant experience and information – something that should be beneficial for learning if information and experiences are systematically gathered and processed. On the other hand hierarchical, top-down policy processes may be better suited for systemic information gathering and

processing – something which we see as a precondition for learning – than those associated with a more fragmented bottom-up policy formation.

Appropriate arenas and commitment to improvement

The prerequisites of policy learning are not challenged only by the nature of wicked issues and multi-level government-systems. Policy learning can be hampered by the absence of learning arenas as well as the lack of commitment to improvement.

Learning prerequisite 4: Existence of learning arenas

Information flow is yet another critical prerequisite of learning. Without information exchange and reflection, learning is for all practical purposes precluded. The process of learning thus requires appropriate arenas or opportunities for information exchange and reflection. Networks have been seen as important arenas for inter-organizational learning as they ensure effective transfer, receipt, and integration of knowledge across participants in the network (Ferlie et al. 2011; Provan & Kenis 2007; Weber & Khademian 2008: 337). We would therefore assume policy learning to be easier if some arenas exist which bring both policy owner and implementers together. Although it cannot be used as a criterion to verify that learning has in fact taken place, one important point of reference is what kinds of arenas exist where policy makers may exchange experiences and information, and how actively these arenas are used.

Learning prerequisite 5: Commitment to policy goals and improvement

Although policy owners get feedback about effect and results of a policy program, they might choose not to alter or redesign the content of the program. Hecló has called it ‘non-learning’ when policy-makers and institutions may be unwilling or unable to adapt to new information (1974: 312). There may be several reasons for this lack of commitment. A policy owner’s inability or unwillingness to change might stem from the environment in which it operates. Peter May (1991) distinguishes between two types of environments – policies *with* publics and policies *without* publics. He argues that these two environments provide quite diverse opportunities for policy learning. In policies with publics, new measures might meet public worry about the consequences. Policies without publics are more technical, and feedback will primarily be instrumental knowledge about ‘what works’ (May 1991: 203). In May’s formulation: “Opportunities for policy learning stem from continuing debate

among publics concerning appropriate objectives...”, but most importantly policy learning is a question of leadership. The challenge is to find a political logic and a policy design “...assembling a new coalition, finding a leader willing to take the blame...that make possible to make use of appropriate policy tools” (May 1991: 203).

Time and resources are limited for political actors, and change of policy is often associated with both political and tangible monetary costs. If new measures are met with strong public resistance, policy owners might choose to drop the redesign of the policy program. On the other hand, too little public awareness might not make it worthwhile for policy owners to change policy, even in the face of environmental feedback that suggests change. High and low political salience might thus render learning less relevant, especially with respect to issues in which elected officials are involved, leaving medium-salient issues as most relevant for systematic knowledge production and learning.

Learning is also affected by the age and history of the policy issue – i.e. how long has the issue been on the policy agenda. The question is to what degree is a policy issue weighed down by “historical baggage” which may serve to constrain the exchange of relevant experiences and information? Is there prestige invested in the policy issue? If so, how much and but what actors? A hypothesis, quite simply, is that the greater the prestige invested, the more difficult policy learning will be.

A policy owner’s unwillingness to change might also be explained by the appropriateness of policy tools. If a policy owner learns that a program fails to realize its targets, new instruments might be introduced, even if that means the program becomes less flexible (Levine et al. 1990, quoted in Birkland 2011: 250). However, there are several reasons why a program owner may not respond by introducing alternative, technically more superior policy instruments. Some policy instruments may be perceived as effective but inappropriate in given contexts. In a multi-level government system, for instance, the state is dependent upon relatively autonomous local and regional actors to implement national policy programs. Hierarchical instruments may be perceived as less appropriate than market- and nodality-type instruments. Maintaining some flexibility and autonomy for local and regional actors may therefore be deemed more important than redesigning a policy program which has failed to reach its objectives. These considerations can be more under-communicated than the explicit goals of a policy program, but nevertheless hinder improvement.

Prospects for learning within three policy domains

The above-mentioned prerequisites can be linked to the scope of learning, in other words whether policy programs are improved or reframed. With no common problem framing, unclear means-ends relationships, absence of learning arenas, and no commitment to improvement, there are slender hopes of improving or reframing policy programs.

In what follows we want to explore how the various prerequisites and considerations may play out with respect to three current policy issues in Norway, which involve wicked problems and multi-level governance in various ways. The question is to what extent improvement of policy programs can be expected within each of these policy domains. Before setting forth more specific expectations or hypotheses, it will be useful to provide a brief description of the three policy areas – settlement of refugees, regional research policy, and urban development respectively.

Settlement of refugees

As is the case in many other countries, Norway has been faced with the challenge of settling persons who have been admitted to the country as refugees and subsequently granted permanent residence permits. On the basis of prevailing social welfare state thinking, refugees with residence permits are to be integrated into Norwegian society and be accorded rights and privileges on par with ordinary citizens. In an effort to achieve this end, national policy is based on a model of dispersion. Rather than allowing refugees to settle wherever they want to settle (and thereby possibly create concentrations in a few localities), national authorities seek to settle refugees throughout the country. Since 2002 this policy objective has been pursued by a system in which each year the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi) sends a letter to municipalities requesting that they accept and settle a specified number of refugees. It is up to each municipality to decide how it will respond to these requests. They may comply fully, accepting all those which IMDi suggests, they may decide to accept even more than the number suggested by IMDi, and they may also decide to accept fewer or even refuse the invitation totally. Settlement decisions made by the municipalities, in short, are made locally on a voluntary basis. Under current policy national authorities cannot force the municipalities to settle refugees. No sanctions can be applied if municipalities, for whatever reason, do not act in accordance with

IMDi requests. Economic subsidies and normative appeals are used, but hierarchical instruction is not a policy instrument.⁵

This policy is the result of a cooperative agreement undertaken between the central government and KS, the Norwegian association of local authorities. The agreement has been regularly renewed, most recently in 2013. For 2013 the agreement stipulated that municipalities would provide settlement for 7,500 persons. At present, however, the settlement program is widely considered as a failure. During the past few years more and more refugees that have been granted asylum, but affirmative municipal responses to the annual requests have not been adequate to cover the need, and more than 5,000 persons currently reside in refugee camps contrary to stated policy goals.⁶

At this point we can turn to a closer examination in terms of the prospects for learning. Our assessments are linked to prerequisites for learning discussed above. Within this policy issue, we would argue that the policy problem is well known and that there is a broadly shared understanding of the policy goals. Under terms of international agreements, Norway is committed to accepting a specified number of refugees each year. To some extent there is agreement on means-ends relationships. Once these refugees have arrived in the country and have been cleared for residence, there has been a broad consensus about dispersing these refugees throughout the country, thereby facilitating their integration into Norwegian society and daily life. There has been a desire to avoid the development of immigrant ghettos and the social problems associated with such residential patterns.

How to achieve this goal has been less readily understood. In principle national authorities have shied away from the idea of forced settlement, at least in terms of dictating where in the country refugees are to be placed following their initial clearance. Housing and social welfare services (schooling for children and primary health care being the most important) along with a mandatory integration program (with language and vocational training) are to be provided for all, but how and where these will be provided are not more precisely defined. So far the means selected has been to pursue a voluntary approach in which municipalities are asked to be part of a

⁵ For each refugee a municipality does agree to accept and settle, the municipality receives a subsidy for a 5-year period which is supposed to cover the costs incurred. The grant is not ear-marked, so if the municipality manages to satisfy the obligations that follow (most importantly a program of social introduction and language instruction) in an efficient fashion and manages to have a surplus, this can be retained and used for other purposes.

⁶ Adult refugees are supposed to be settled within 6 months of a positive decision on their asylum application, and for children the period is 3 months.

collective implementation process. Municipalities that agree receive compensation for the costs involved, but they are not legally obliged to acquiesce to the requests they receive from central government authorities each year. The fact that this voluntary approach has not succeeded has been a matter of some surprise - and embarrassment to national actors, both those in central government ministries and directorates as well as KS, the national association of local authorities which negotiated the agreement and policy guidelines with the government on behalf of its members, the municipalities.

It is also quite clear that refugee settlement is not a policy issue in which there is a unitary actor nor, for that matter, common interests. Rather there are several actors at both the national and regional level as well as 428 municipalities. While it might be argued that national and regional authorities are in reasonable agreement about the primary policy objectives and interests these imply, the same cannot be said about municipal actors. Requests sent to the municipalities must be acted upon, typically by means of a municipal council resolution. The considerations and relative importance attached to the different considerations upon which such decisions are made are by no means universal. Questions relating to municipal planning, service capacity and the economic implications involved tend to be prominent in all local decisions, but how these are assessed varies greatly. In some municipalities refugees are seen as an asset, a source of potential income and demographic growth in the face of population decline. For other municipalities the opposite holds; they may not have the capacity needed to take on and provide the services required for refugees, and adequate housing may not be available.

As for a commitment to policy goals and “improvement” as a prerequisite for learning, the picture is less clear. Few if any either at the national, regional or local levels would dispute the overall policy objective, at least in an abstract sense. But a commitment to “improvement” and greater policy success is a bit more mixed, especially at the local level where some actors perceive themselves to be prisoners of a situation that leaves them little room for manoeuvre. National and regional authorities, on the other hand, generally see the need to find ways of achieving better policy performance. In this respect the prospects for learning are more positive despite the wicked character of the problem.

These assessments with respect to the conditions for policy learning are summarized in one of the columns found below in Table 1. Comparable assessments

with respect to the other two policy domains are found in two other columns. The basis for assessments relating to these latter two policy issues follow in a slightly more abbreviated form.

Regional research policy

In 2010 national research policy in Norway obtained a stronger regional component, when regional research funds were created with a total capital of roughly 725 million Euro. In total, public spending on research and development (R&D) in Norway was about 2,8 billion Euro, whereof one-third is channelled through the Research Council of Norway (regjeringen.no). The regional funds were originally intended to be part of a large reform that would facilitate transfer of selected responsibilities from central government to regional and municipal governments. However, the existing government decided to abandon its regional reform ambitions in 2008 (cf. Baldersheim & Rose 2010: 92–97). The regional research funds were kept, but given a more specific research oriented design. Responsibility for the funds was placed under the Ministry of Education and Research (KD) and seven research regions were created. The counties within each region are expected to develop a research and development strategy document as well as a letter of intent, which serve as a mandate for regional boards. The boards in turn fashion a plan of action, which serves as the basis for application announcements and award decisions. The regional boards are vested with authority to award grants based on the funds at their disposal, which are part of the annual yield from the national fund. Each board consist of representatives for the counties covered (not necessarily politicians) and representatives appointed on the basis of recommendations made by the Norwegian Research Council (NFR). The creation of the regional research funds provided counties with a new means of pursuing a more focused research policy. It remains unclear, however, how actively involved county politicians have been in the process of formulating the R&D strategies.

With respect to the prospects of learning, there is a general agreement about the importance of knowledge and high quality research as important factors in positioning Norway to meet the challenges of increased globalization and international competition within many areas of economic activity. Both previous and current national governments have emphasized the idea that Norway must have high ambitions with respect to being a knowledge-based country.

How the creation of the regional research funds and activities in the seven regions fit into this broader understanding, however, might be more ambiguous. As already noted, the funds and regional boards are a bi-product of a failed regional reform effort by the previous government. The regional research fund must therefore also be seen as a measure, which is in keeping with a broader, long-standing policy commitment to support the Norwegian periphery and to counterweigh against otherwise strong centralizing tendencies. Initially, critics feared that regional funding would lead to research of inferior quality. Evaluations of the various projects, however, seem to dismiss this fear (Nifu 2013). A good deal of discretion has intentionally been granted the counties in order to allow them to define objectives and strategies of local relevance in a bottom-up policy process rather than attempting to stipulate and impose these in a top-down fashion. Thus, there seems to be a general agreement on national and local level of the suitability of regional research funds as a tool to promote regional research in order to stimulate regional growth and innovation.

A more adverse obstacle to policy learning under these circumstances is the lack of a unitary actor and common interests. Not only are there seven different regional boards, but each region encompasses several counties, each of which may have different agendas and priorities for future developments. In addition to this national responsibility is divided between the Ministry of Education and Research (KD) and the Norwegian Research Council (NFR). The former (KD) has overarching budgetary and administrative responsibility as well as responsibility for coordinating the government's overall research policy, whereas the latter (NFR) is responsible for appointing the panels of experts which evaluate all applications submitted to the regional funds.

The regional funds were meant to create "arenas for development and learning in which regional experiences could be discussed in relation to national and international knowledge and activities" (NFR 2010). That this objective was explicitly articulated at the time of establishment, should be seen as positive for the prospect of how learning might transpire either horizontally, among actors in the different regions, or vertically, between actors at the regional level and those at the national level.

Despite this fragmented and unclear picture with respect to the actors involved, it can nonetheless be suggested that there is a common commitment – at least at a

general level – to the policy goals in question and a shared willingness to seek improvement in achieving these goals over time. It remains unclear, however, how involved county politicians in fact have been in the process of formulating the regional R&D strategies.

In sum, our assessment regarding the prospects for learning, as the entries in Table 1 indicate, a bit more positive in this case than it was for the settlement of refugees policy domain.

Urban development/architect policy

Increased urban density and the realization of more “compact cities” has been a national policy objective since the beginning of the 1990s. A good deal of research has been devoted to urban development and energy use, especially as these related to transportation issues. National authorities have subsequently expended a good deal of effort in providing municipal and county authorities with relevant information and guidance on how to achieve more concentrated development practices. National guidelines have also been established as a means of providing a more explicit basis for public authorities to evaluate and possibly object to development plans. During the same period there has been a noteworthy increase in the involvement of private sector actors in urban renewal and development projects, and many projects have been of a more extensive character. Architect contests have been conducted in connection with many of the projects, and questions relating to the aesthetic as well as economic and social consequences of planned developments have become more prominent in the planning and decisions processes.

Central authorities have had an important role in formulating an overarching strategy for the realization of more sustainable urban environments. The Ministry of the Environment (MD) has had primary responsibility, although following a recent change in national government responsibility for land use planning was transferred to the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization (KMD). The latter ministry also has responsibility for housing and property issues. The KMD ministry’s authority allows it to overrule municipal decisions and to decide conflicts in instances where objections have been raised. The environmental section of the County Prefect’s (Fylkesmann) office is charged with reviewing municipal plans and submitting objections if the plans are deemed not to be in keeping with national objectives. For their part, counties adopt county plans, which provide general guidelines for

municipal planning activities and are expected to fulfil a pedagogical role by arranging relevant conferences and seminars among other things. Counties may also submit objections with respect to municipal plans should they be deemed contrary to regional interests.

Looking more closely at policy learning, the prospects seem dim in connection with urban development and architectural policy. First of all, the policy domain is characterized by the absence of a common national goal. Instead, emphasis has been put on developing guidelines for decision-makers at regional and local level decision.

The lack of a clear statement of policy goals might be seen in relation to the lack of a shared formulation of the policy problem, as urban development and architect policy contains elements relevant to both planning, transportation, and environment. Lack of a common goal also hinders a common understanding of the relevant means-ends relationships. Another primary significance in this case is the fact that the policy domain is characterized by a fragmented set of actors. Not only are there multiple public sector actors at the national, regional and local levels; there are in addition private sector actors involved in urban development, like architects and entrepreneurial firms, some of which operate internationally. This makes the notion of common interests illusory.

The same may be said about a commitment to the policy goals and interest in seeking improvement over time. The existence of multiple actors constitutes a critical barrier to be overcome if some form of genuine collective learning is to take place.

Our overall assessments with respect to the conditions for policy learning in all the three policy domains are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Requirements for policy learning and whether they are fulfilled with respect to three policy issues characterized as wicked problems within a system of multi-level governance *

Requirements for learning	Settlement of refugees	Regional research	Urban development
• Well-known (shared) problem framing and clear policy goals	+	+	-
• Well understood means-ends relationships	-	+	-
• Unitary actor and common interests	-	-	-
• Existence of learning arenas		+	-
• Commitment to policy goals and “improvement”	+/-	+/-	-
Overall expectations of (the scope of) policy learning	Negative. Only small improvements in policy expected	Positive. Improvement (and possibly reframing) of policy expected	Negative. No changes in policy expected

* Legend: + = Positive; - = Negative; +/- = Mixed

Conclusion: Prospects of learning in the shadow of complexity

Our assessments of learning prospects within the three policy sectors are of a very course calibre. Nuances can undoubtedly be added, and some may well disagree with our reading of the conditions existing in each of the policy domains. If nothing more, the assessments should be treated as preliminary working hypotheses based on our current familiarity with each policy area. At this point, however, we would suggest that in two of the policy domains would there appear to be no grounds for great optimism with respect to prospects for more systemic *overarching or common learning*, at least insofar as the prerequisites for ideal policy learning are taken as a point of departure.

Even so, we hasten to add that our assessments should not lead to entirely dismal conclusions. Learning is not impossible. We merely state that learning is likely to be more difficult when policy makers confront wicked problems in multi-level systems

of government. There are, moreover, degrees of wickedness (Head & Alford 2013). In seeking to understand learning processes better it will presumably be necessary to establish more precise measures or criteria of wickedness. What are the relevant dimensions and how can they be “measured” in an objective fashion?

Another challenge to be faced arises due to the fact that so far, as Dunlop and Radaelli (2012:601) note, little is actually known about how communities of policy makers learn in real-world settings. In the extant literature, according to Dunlop and Radaelli, there has been a stronger focus on the products of learning than on the actual process of learning. One explanation for this situation is that observation and measurement of actual learning processes is problematic (Radaelli & Dunlop 2013). Learning does not necessarily imply changed behaviour or a decision to change the course of policy action. How else do we know when learning occurs? In qualitative interviews respondents may be inclined to overestimate the role of learning in the policy-making process (Radaelli 2009: 1147), and perhaps only report the success stories of learning.

Obviously other considerations and dimensions may be relevant and influence learning processes in connection with wicked policy problems within multi-level governmental systems. The discussion above is by no means exhaustive. The three policy areas selected for closer analysis in our research efforts may also not fully and adequately serve to illustrate the most important conditions which pertaining. They do, however, offer a platform for obtaining a better glimpse into an area of substantive relevance which to date has been the object of relatively little attention. It is into this area, which we hope to be able to make a contribution.

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