

Dynamic Transformational Mechanisms in Policy Success and Failure

Mallory Compton and Paul 't Hart

Utrecht University School of Governance

Abstract

The premise of a dynamic policy model—e.g., that sequence matters or decision making is constrained by what has already happened—applies to many, if not most, social-political phenomena. Yet, when contextualized with defined scope conditions, the same dynamic mechanism might explain not just stability and change, but the success or otherwise of public policies. In this paper, we first discuss the value of a dynamic and mechanistic perspective to the study of policy success, we elaborate a three dimensional concept of policy success (programmatic, process, and political performance), and we examine how some transformational mechanisms can reinforce or work against these dynamics. Singling out two examples - positive feedback and collaboration - as examples of transformational mechanisms, we explore how these perspectives can inform theoretical explanations of policy success.

Word count: 7,627 (limit: 8,000)

Prepared for presentation to the GDN III Workshop, Florence, Italy, December 1-2, 2017

This is a working draft; please do not quote, cite, or circulate without explicit permission from the authors.

Significant accomplishments of public policy successes are not always -- or even rarely -- noticed and appreciated for what they are. The Dutch survive safely in a country where the bulk of the population lives huddled together well below current sea level, Brazil leads the world in tackling poverty and inequality, and Botswana has avoided the resource curse against all odds. In each case, smartly designed, well-executed, broadly supported and continuously evolving public policy programs are what makes this happen. In this paper, we examine how transformational mechanisms can remake political and social institutions to reinforce performance and contribute to the success of public policies. In doing so, we assume that public policy analysis and design necessitates a dynamic perspective, that policy processes unfold over time, and that temporality is an essential aspect of explanatory public policy theory.

The study of success in public policy has so far been a modest affair compared to the ongoing efforts to expose public policy failures and scandals and the inherent pathologies of government (Bovens and 't Hart 1996; Bovens and Hart 2016; Hall 1982; Peirce 1981; Schuck 2014). The stubborn few who insist on studying public policy achievements have mainly focused on conceptualizing what 'success' looks like in the complex and often contentious endeavor that is a public policy, program, or project. These works have sought to build frameworks for assessing forms and degrees of success in real cases, and to do so in ways that enable analysts to progress beyond the elegant but oversimplified emphasis on goal achievement that dominated classic program evaluation methodologies and the analytical vagaries of subsequent constructivist and goal-free approaches to evaluation (Bovens, 't Hart, and Peters 2001; McConnell 2010b). What this line of research has yet to deliver is a robust framework capable of explaining differential performance of otherwise similar policy endeavors, though it has certainly generated initial hypotheses (see also Glazer and Rothenberg 2001; Patashnik 2008). To our knowledge, there has been no study that systematically attempts to identify the role of social mechanisms in the achievement, consolidation, and reproduction of policy successes.

This is a remarkable omission. Because public policy outcomes successful or otherwise materialize through dynamic processes, building and unfolding over time, it seems obvious that in explaining policy outcomes at any given time t a dynamic perspective should be taken, focused on specifying mechanisms driving those outcomes realized since time $t-1$. That said, in a parallel universe, historical-institutionalist research on positive or negative feedback in policy regimes has identified a host of mechanisms through which policy outcomes and change are effected (see, for example, Jacobs and Weaver 2015; Jordan and Matt 2014; Pierson 1993; Weaver 2010). In this article, we seek to contribute to the study of policy success by borrowing from this subfield,

which has not concerned itself with evaluative questions about success or failure but rather with explaining stability and change in public policy over time. Both the *policy success* or a *policy dynamics* perspectives can be used to illuminate questions about public policy design and management which hitherto dominant ‘textbook’ models of public policy (e.g. the policy cycle, multiple streams, advocacy coalitions, and punctuated equilibrium frameworks; Peters, 2015) overlook or obscure. By combining the two, we are able to theorize about the interconnections between (dynamic) mechanisms and (successful) policy outcomes. We choose to focus on two transformational mechanisms in the study of policy dynamics: positive feedback and cooperation.

(Transformational) Mechanisms in Public Policy¹

In their critique of historical institutionalism, Peters, Pierre, and King (2005, 1284) argue that identifying systematic patterns between social phenomena is not sufficient, and “to be effective a theory should be capable of linking outcomes with actors and with the process that produced the outcomes.” In other words, acceptable explanation must link cause and effect through a social process and avoid “black box” associations (Hedstrom and Swedberg 1996). Studies of policy change are also critiqued for struggling to specify mechanisms capable of explaining magnitude of observed change (for example, consider Givel 2010; Howlett and Rayner 2006).

In spite of a wide literature on feedback dynamics, accounts of causation in social and political life remain a niche enterprise (Ayres 2014; Cavana and Mares 2004; Collander and Kupers 2014; Jervis 1997; De Roo, J, and Hillier 2012). Also, the literature on unintended consequences remains fixed on linear causal relations as the default option for understanding policy outcomes (Ayres 2014; van der Steen et al. 2013). And with good reasons; for stable and bounded systems the linear causal model is a suitable way to establish a relation between cause and effect, and accordingly assign success and failure to clearly demarcated moments in time and specific actions taken by actors in those moments (Collander and Kupers 2014). However, when applied to unstable or complex systems, the linear perspective presents two shortcomings.

Firstly, it does not take into account interactive dynamics. Interventions do not stop at the designated target or time-period but continue beyond. The linear perspective assumes the causal effect of A to be *bounded* to B. However, in complex systems it is difficult to project beforehand where effects will ‘go’, how long they resonate, and who will respond to it. What is

¹ Parts of this section were adapted from van der Steen et al. (2015), pp. 325-326, with kind permission of Paul ’t Hart’s co-authors.

called an “unexpected outcome” from the linear view on causality (Sieber, 1981:10) can be *expected* from the perspective of interactive complexity. Secondly, the linear perspective on causation hardly takes into account *reflexivity*, or the *learning capacity* of agents. When policy is added to a system, agents learn from what happens. Over time they will change their response to measures. What seemed to work the first time probably plays out differently the next because the previous intervention changed the system; it instigated learning in the system and as a result agents may behave differently next time. Causation is a dynamic process that evolves over time, rather than a fixed, stable and almost a-temporal relation between cause and effect. Key to overcoming the limitations of the linear view is a specification of mechanisms that can account for interactive or multi-level effects, or for evolution of capacities and interests as policies take their course over time.

To explain the occurrence of policy we must look beyond linear and fixed mechanisms of cause and effect through a lens of causality that takes into account the *dynamics* in the system (Leeuw 2008). Therefore, we apply the lens of circular causality to the study of policy success and look at causal loops. Circular causality originates in the system dynamics and cybernetics literature, and it is applied in the context of policy and system analysis (Cavana and Mares 2004; Chapman 2004; Deutsch 1963; Forrester 1961; Haraldsson 2000b; Laitin and Wildavsky 1988; Maani and Cavana 2000; Perrow 1984; Steinbruner 1974). Central to this view is the interconnectedness of elements and the feedback mechanisms that shape the interactions between them. It considers outcomes the effect of interrelated interactions between different actors and factors of the system (Richardson 1991; Richmond 1993).

Actions generate feedback, which becomes input for others; the feedback-loops create patterns, often in the form of *loops* (Merali and Allen 2011). The literature discerns different basic shapes of causal loops. Some loops are self-balancing, others display a *self-reinforcing* pattern: a change in one factor enforces a loop that leads to a magnification of the original effect (Haraldsson 2000b; Lane 2008; Maruyama 1963; Richardson 1986; Senge 1990; Toole 2005). Some loops draw the system more towards an outcome intended by the policy maker – a virtuous cycle - while others – vicious cycles - pull it further away from what was meant (Masuch 1985; Morçöl 2010).

Systems that are dominated by self-balancing loops have in-build mechanisms that draw towards status quo; disturbances are corrected through the self-balancing patterns (Haraldsson 2000b; Morçöl 2010; Teisman, Van Buuren, and Gerrits 2009). The opposite goes for systems with strong or dominant self-reinforcing loops; then, originally minor interventions can

accelerate into large development in the system that can flip the balance of the system as a whole; this can be positive in terms of intended outcomes, but also negative. Sometimes a system develops into a virtuous circle that generates excellence; sometimes a system is locked in a vicious cycle that eventually leads to its downfall. The perspective of social mechanisms and causal loops therefore offers a potentially more compelling account of the process of policies 'becoming' successes (or failures).

Scholars attentive to the importance of social mechanisms have sorted causal mechanisms in various ways (e.g., Falleti and Lynch 2009; van der Heijden and Kuhlmann 2017; Mahoney 2000). They deem it important when classifying mechanisms to be attentive to “(1) the level of reality they refer to, (2) their degree of conceptual abstraction, and (3) their assumed scope of application” (Mayntz 2004, 246). Building on Coleman (1990) and Hedstrom and Swedberg (1996), we adopt a macro-micro relations approach to social science mechanisms. Within this framework, a *transformational* mechanism is a social mechanism that governs how individual (micro) actions transform into a collective (macro) outcome. It suggests that macro-level effects are more than the aggregation of individual behavioral adaptations to the stimulus provided by a particular program or policy instrument. Over time, it is the *interactions* among individuals whose behavior has been shaped by micro-level action-formation mechanisms that generate macro-level changes in formal or informal institutions. The macro-level context has changed, requiring a re-evaluation of inputs into a situational mechanism.

For example, individuals are incentivized to politically support policies that deliver personal benefits to them, e.g. a government subsidy or tax break that they are eligible for or a renewable energy strategy that fits their personal convictions and circumstances. When they notice and act upon this incentive, the resultant change in belief, idea, and/or policy preference is an action-formation mechanism triggered by the passage and implementation of a policy. As these individuals with a common interest subsequently interact to coordinate shared goals (in this instance: advocate and lobby for the continuation or further expansion of the subsidy, tax scheme or energy policy), a transformational mechanism unfolds as a new political coalition emerges, altering the macro-context. Patashnik (2008) shows how government policy to deregulate civil aviation in the US did not just forge the end of the existing oligopoly of the big-3 airlines by incentivizing new and small operators to enter the market (micro), but doing so in effect altered the structure of the policy arena (macro). Deregulation had called into being a new constituency working to retain the new status quo in the sector, which now helped to 'lock in' what had been a highly contentious and therefore potentially reversible reform. Likewise, once

‘Obamacare’ was finally adopted and started to deliver benefits to millions of Americans (micro), it became more difficult politically for Obama’s successor to deliver on his campaign promise of terminating it wholesale (macro). In other words, the effects of *transformational* mechanisms materialize over time as the micro level incentives for and interactions between individual citizens, groups, and firms cumulate into macro-level change in political structures, social norms, and generalized expectations.

This macro-micro perspective on policy dynamics can be reconciled with the circular causal view of policy systems discussed above by recognizing a loop which connects the outcome of transformational mechanisms to the input into situational mechanisms—a feedback loop. Where transformational mechanisms generate change at the macro-level that reinforces the value, performance, or legitimacy of a policy instrument or program, this loop is *reinforcing*. Where the effect of the three-stage social mechanism chain increases the magnitude of original effect, the ‘loop’ in Figure 1 represents a self-reinforcing pattern—a virtuous policy cycle of enduring policy success. On the other hand, where the effect of the mechanism chain is to undercut the value of the effect a policy instrument or program has on society, this loop in Figure 1 would instead represent self-undermining policy cycle, or even a vicious policy cycle.

[Figure 1 about here]

By now, these dynamics are beginning to be well-understood (see e.g. Kay 2006; Patashnik 2008). What is less obvious is how these mechanisms affect the degree to which policies are – or come to be seen to be – successful. This is what we now turn to.

Policy Success

Having recognized the critical role of dynamics mechanisms and complex/circular causality in explanation, the question of interest then arises: when, how, and why do transformational mechanisms produce reinforcing patterns of *policy success*? First, it must be decided what can be called a policy success. Assessment of public policy is necessarily multi-dimensional (Bovens and ‘t Hart 1996; Fischer 1995). At a most fundamental level, both effective *performance* and public *legitimacy* are necessary for success. Assessing the performance of a policy refers to evaluating its substantive societal impact of a policy. Assessing its legitimacy requires ascertaining the way it is perceived, experienced and appreciated by stakeholders in public, political, and legal arenas. It may be reasonable to expect that both types of assessment yield symmetrical results: high-performing policies will be popular and respected (and will thus have a good chance of becoming self-sustaining). In reality, this is not always the case. Asymmetries can and do emerge.

Well-performing policies (e.g. EU membership of Central European countries that has demonstrable contributed to their economic growth) may not for that reason always enjoy broad public and political support (as public opinion data and recent election results in e.g. Poland and Hungary suggest). Likewise, ineffective or counterproductive policies may nevertheless enjoy strong legitimacy because of their strong fit with dominant value systems and political power structures (US gun ‘control’ policies come to mind). It is an open question what this means for the survival of these policies over time. US gun laws may be an instance of ‘permanently failing public policy’: not delivering core desirables such as harm reduction, but nevertheless politically unassailable. But more often than not, asymmetries between performance and legitimacy may create a context conducive to policy change: policy learning to improve the substantive performance of a program while it still enjoys a viable level of political support; political learning to improve an unpopular but fungible policy’s reputation and solidify the constellation of stakeholders supporting it; or policy termination to rid the system of programmatic and/or political ‘train wrecks’.

McConnell (2010) reformulated this assessment matrix into a three-dimensional frame, with performance evaluated in programmatic, process, and political terms. This three-dimensional view of success has been further refined by Compton and ‘t Hart (n.d.). First, *programmatic assessment* is a “classic” evaluation, focused on explicit policy goals, the theory of change underpinning policy design, and the selection of instruments— all culminating in judgments about the degree to which a policy achieves valuable impacts. This aspect of success is achieved when purposeful and valued action manifests as a direct consequence of the policy instruments. This may entail (a) a well-developed and empirically feasible public value proposition and theory of change underpins the policy, (b) achievement of (or considerable momentum towards) the policy’s intended and/or of other beneficial social outcomes, and (c) costs/benefits associated with the policy are distributed equitably in society.

Second, *process assessment* is an evaluation of the extent to which processes of policy design, decision-making and delivery are organized and managed in a way to contribute to both its problem-solving capacity and stakeholder’s support for what it tries to achieve and how it tries to do so. This is achieved by thoughtful and effective policymaking practices. This requires (a) a design process that ensures carefully considered choice of policy instruments appropriate to context and in a manner that is perceived to be correct and fair, (b) a decision-making process resulting in firm political commitment and adequate levels of funding, realistic time lines, and administrative capacity, and (c) a delivery process that effectively and adaptively deploys (mix of)

policy instrument(s) to achieve intended outcomes with acceptable costs, and with limited unintended negative consequences.

Lastly, *political assessment* evaluates the degree to which policymakers and agencies involved in driving and delivering the policy can build and maintain fungible political coalitions supporting it, and the degree to which their being associated with it enhances their reputations. In other words, this lens examines both the political requirements for policy success and the distribution of political costs/benefits among the actors involved in it. This is the achievement of stakeholder and public legitimacy for the policy. The components of this dimension of success include (a) a relatively broad and deep political coalition supports the policy's value proposition, (b) that association with the policy enhances the political capital of the responsible policy-makers, and (c) that association with the policy enhances the organizational reputation of the relevant public agencies.

Embedded in each dimension of these policy assessments (programmatic, process, and political) is temporality—both performance and public and political perceptions of that performance unfold over time (see Bovens and 't Hart 1996). Therefore, for a policy to be called completely successful, this level of performance must be sustained even in the case of exogenous contextual changes. Such changes may include economic and fiscal ebbs and flows, changes in government composition, demographic and socio-cultural change in target populations, or technological changes in the service delivery environment. In other words, policies that not only endure but also continue to deliver public value in the face of contextual change probably have an adaptive capacity in their modus operandi to sustain the virtuous cycles that made it successful in the first place.

In sum, we define a policy (program, project) as completely successful when (a) it demonstrably produces valued social outcomes, (b) through deliberate design, decision-making, and delivery processes that enhance both its problem-solving capacity and its political legitimacy, and (c) sustains this performance for a considerable period of time, even in the face of changing circumstances (Compton and 't Hart, n.d.). Table 1 summarizes this dynamic conception of policy evaluation.

[Table 1 about here]

Dynamic Mechanisms, Path Dependency and Policy Success

Through the success frame, systematic identification of outcomes of interest in a population of cases becomes possible. That done, it then becomes the role of explanatory public policy theory, and the mechanisms specified therein, to account for how policy success emerges and whether and how it is sustained over time. Minimally, “dynamic” explanation implies time as an independent variable in a model of some phenomenon. Of course, the role of time in public policy is not as simple as this, and dynamic theories are often subject to conceptual ambiguity or under-specification (Kay, 2006; Grzymala-Busse 2011; Howlett and Goetz 2014). Importantly, any number of theories may underpin an observed dynamic policy development, hinging on a variety of causal mechanisms.

Closely related to the concept of dynamic policy is *path dependency*. Although commonly cited and of potential value to the explanation of specific policy cases, theories of path dependency are especially susceptible to critique for mechanistic confusion or conceptual stretching (for example, Kay, 2006; Rixen and Viola 2015; Thelen 2000; Torfing 2009). The most parsimonious definition of path dependence is a process in which future choice sets are constrained by past decisions (North 1990), with a more rigorous concept entailing a highly inertial (deterministic) process in which events occurring early and randomly in history matter most in an institution’s trajectory (Mahoney 2000). This is not a particularly helpful definition if prediction is the goal, because there are numerous underlying mechanisms through which this reduction of ‘choice options’ may occur (with increasing returns being just one), and, a reliance on ‘random’ and indeterminate events defining critical junctures precludes *ex ante* explanation. The paucity of available theoretical mechanisms producing inertial policy or institutional paths (beyond increasing returns) is a key analytical challenge for path dependence in public policy research (e.g., Greener 2005; Torfing 2009).

With a broader view of path dependence as the consequence of any decision “that is difficult to reverse and which has enduring and ongoing effects” (Kay 2006, 34), almost any (if not all) policies advanced beyond the stage of an idea will entail sunk costs ensuring that it is ‘path dependent,’ to some degree. As Rose and Davies (1994) demonstrate in their longitudinal study of the stability and change of British central government spending programs, what policymakers inherit in terms of pre-existing commitments, entitlements and otherwise path-dependent choices of their predecessors once they assume office is a much more important component of what they themselves will leave behind when they depart than the autonomous choices for policy initiation or policy change that they make whilst in office. When used in this way in research, path dependency thus becomes ‘an empirical category, an organizing concept or

metaphor which can be used to label a certain type of temporal process' (Kay 2006, 30). With this understanding, labeling a phenomenon as path dependent may mean little more than to assert that early events affect the probability of later events, without suggesting *how* or through which social mechanisms this effect manifests. Because a variety of mechanisms might explain *why* past decisions shape future programmatic, political, or administrative possibilities, causal leverage will come from specification of the mechanism driving the dynamic process.

Falleti and Lynch (2009) compile a (non-exhaustive) list of the ways scholars have theorized policy decisions to exert transformative effects on the macro-context, i.e., dynamic (or in some cases labeled path dependent) mechanisms. These include: belief formation, rational choice, brokerage, coordination, framing, power reproduction, learning (social learning; political learning), positive feedback (organizational inertia; policy ratchet effect), replacement, layering, conversion, policy drift, increasing returns, and functional consequence. Any of these arguments imply a policy process which is costly to reverse and which has effects at the macro-level. Scholars of public policy often identify these mechanisms as reinforcing effects, which create self-sustaining policy regimes to the exclusion of alternative policy institutions (Jervis 1997; Pierson 1993, 2000). Feedback mechanisms should account for stability and change in institutions, however, as well as the maintenance of the status quo (Thelen 1999). As Weaver (2010, 137) points out, it is "equally important to focus on negative policy feedbacks: consequences of policy that tend to undermine rather than reinforce the political, fiscal, or social sustainability of a particular set of priorities." Whether a particular feedback (or dynamic) mechanism will generate reinforcing effects on a policy regime will depend on the balance of competing political, social, and fiscal (positive and negative) influences (Jacobs and Weaver 2015; Weaver 2010).

Acknowledging that the same causal mechanism may generate positive or negative forces on the performance, legitimacy and endurance of a policy, we now turn to a discussion of how two such mechanisms (positive feedback and coordination) operate to create path dependencies in initially successful public policies, serving to reinforce and sustain that success.

Positive Feedback

With the passage of the Social Security Act in 1935, Congress institutionalized a social safety net the likes of which had never been seen before in the US. Broad cross-sections of the American citizenry became eligible for government benefits, thereby gaining a vested interest in the continuation of those federal programs. The passage of these health, pension,

unemployment, and need based income assistance programs altered the stakes individuals saw in supporting social policies. Social policy implementation can shape opinion about a program among beneficiaries or the mass public (e.g., Mettler and Soss 2004; Mettler and Welch 2004; Soss and Schram 2007), but going beyond this effect on interests and opinions, the Social Security Administration effectively created a new social and political coalition: retired seniors (Campbell 2003, 2012). In the process of implementing this policy to transfer material benefits, an administrative classification was established that has come to symbolize and organize a political entity. Retired seniors now constitute a powerful political coalition in American politics with strong support for the continuation of Social Security (Pierson 1993). This coalition now not only mobilizes to protect their benefits from Social Security, but for other policy goals as well (for example, the AARP Public Policy Institute exists to research and advocate a range of policy priorities relevant to the elderly). This is an example of *positive (interest group) feedback*: passage of this policy set in motion a process whereby a support coalition was created where none existed before.

Evaluating how this transformative mechanism can contribute to policy success requires examination of each dimension of policy performance: programmatic, process, and political.² With respect to *programmatic performance*, the relevant question is how the mechanism of positive feedback can contribute to purposeful and valued action. Following enactment of the Social Security Act, a new political constituency emerged with an interest in protecting the original goals of the program. Establishment of this coalition and the policy implementing institutions might create inertia, thereby increasing the likelihood of continued performance, if initially achieved. With respect to *process performance*, the question is how positive interest group feedback can contribute to thoughtful and effective policymaking practices. Attention and oversight by constituency provides impetus for adequate funding and wise selection of policy instruments. In this way, a growing coalition of voters with an interest in protecting their benefits might put pressure on the process of implementation to achieve and maintain performance. Lastly, with respect to *political performance*, how can positive interest group feedback contribute to stakeholder and public legitimacy for the policy? The establishment of a supportive constituency for the policy is fundamental to success on this dimension. Over time, as the number of current and future policy beneficiaries grows, the political salience and legitimacy of the policy program might also grow. The establishment of a supportive coalition clearly benefits the political success

² To evaluate each dimension of success in each of the cases we present here in depth would be beyond the scope (and length) of this article. Here, we seek only to highlight where these feedback mechanisms have the potential to reinforce policy success.

of a program, but might also promote sustained performance in programmatic and process terms.

Cooperation

When societal problems spill over jurisdictional boundaries, collaboration between political entities can be beneficial in providing policy solutions—solving some social problems requires cooperation. International money laundering is one such problem. The proliferation of anti-money laundering standards in the past 30 years reflects a diverse set of policy goals related to corruption, drug trafficking, and more recently, terrorism (Tsingou 2010). Initiated by the EU and the US in 1989, the Financial Action Task Force published a list of forty best practices for financial supervision and regulation, law enforcement guidelines, and protocols for international cooperation which are now adopted by more than 170 countries worldwide (Drezner 2005; Sharman 2008). The EU and the US implemented these recommendations quickly out of clear self-interest as the largest beneficiaries of cooperation, and other developed (OECD) members soon followed (Drezner 2005).

As the problem of offshore financial centers evolved, the benefits of collaboration in the coordination of national and transnational measures to prevent future banking scandals grew, and the US and EU put effort towards persuasion and inducements (along with the threat of penalizing “countermeasures” for non-participants) to ensure widespread international policy harmonization (Drezner 2005). Although the process of harmonization by less-developed countries did require coercive power on the part of the EU and the US (Sharman 2008), the benefits of collaboratively co-produced coordinated money laundering regulation reinforce the survival of an existing set of standards. Changing the policy regime that has so been forged would require the coordination of all current participants (more than 170), thereby incurring large transaction costs. This is a case of *policy lock-in due to coordination* benefits: once an initial advantage is gained (a set of standards adopted by some), benefits increase with additional adoption and the cost of policy change increases (Pierson 1993, 2000; Patashnik, 2008).

Again, to consider how this mechanism—lock-in due to coordination—can contribute to policy success, three questions arise. First, how does lock-in due to collaboratively produced policy coordination contribute to purposeful and valued action? Policies designed to address problems that cross borders—like money laundering—will be most effective where regimes across jurisdictions are harmonized. Once implemented, coordination like the harmonization of anti-money laundering can contribute to *programmatic performance* because defection from the

shared regime could severely limit achievement of beneficial social outcomes. Second is the question of whether this mechanism contributes to *process performance*, by institutionalizing thoughtful and effective policymaking practices. The now extensive research on collaborative governance suggests that a careful institutional design, facilitative leadership and the emergence of interpersonal trust and shared understandings of commonly faced challenges in collaborative settings where actors that previously failed to coordinate their actions or even competed against one another, can generate an ever stronger commitment to the collaborative process itself, which in turn increases the chances of the collaboration producing valuable outcomes and sustaining itself over time. Figure 2, taken from the authoritative review by Ansell and Gash (2008), clearly demonstrates the complex, dynamic and potentially cyclical nature of collaborative processes. *Process success* – defined here as the emergence of a virtuous circle of trust-building – is possible, but contingent upon the extent to which smart institutional design and effective facilitative leadership (later elaborated in Ansell and Gash 2012) combine to overcome initial commitment problems and lack of trust rooted in the pre-history of relations between the parties now facing (or forced to own up to) a common challenge. Collaborative processes are complex but fickle: there is a relatively thin line between virtuous and vicious cycles, which are characterized by loss of interpersonal trust and lessening commitment to the collaborative process. Collaborative governance consistently shows that much depends on continued and painstaking micro-level interactions for the macro-level benefits of policy coordination to come into being.

[Figure 2 about here]

Finally, according to Sorenson and Torfing (2009; see also Torfing et al. 2012), the *political performance* of collaborative and coordinated policymaking hinges on the extent to which both the collaborative process and its products are sufficiently ‘anchored’ democratically. This is the case when a collaborative mechanism (they use the term ‘network’): ‘1. Is monitored by elected politicians capable of influencing the relatively self-regulated policy processes proceeding within the network; 2. Comprises private business and civil society actors whose performance in the network is critically assessed by the members of the organizations and groups they claim to represent; 3. Is accountable to the citizens affected by the decisions of the network and who are capable of scrutinizing and contesting publicly available accounts of how the network has handled different policy issues; 4. Re-enacts a series of commonly accepted democratic rules and norms ensuring the broad inclusion of relevant and affected actors, procedural fairness and agonistic respect among actors perceiving one another as legitimate adversaries rather than enemies’ (Sorenson and Torfing 2009, 244). Clearly, such democratic anchorage can be actively

‘designed in’ or purchased by prudent institutional design – bringing political, business and civil society actors into the collaborative tent early and authentically; – and prudent facilitative leadership – seducing participants in the collaborative process to not just work together to achieve coordinated policies but to also co-design and commit themselves to accountability mechanisms that give voice to the lived (micro-)experiences of clients and the (macro-)effects on target groups.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that explaining policy success demands both a *dynamic* perspective and a *mechanistic* perspective. Work on policy design and policy change has highlighted the crucial role that mechanisms play in explanatory theory (which is, after all, the impetus for this conference/special issue). To move forward the study of public policy success beyond description and in the direction of policy design, research should endeavor to incorporate insights from the study of policy mechanisms into theories to explain performance dimensions (programmatic, process, and political). Viewing policy processes as circular causal loops, consisting of feedback through social mechanisms, is advantageous to this goal by allowing theory (and potentially policy design) to account for both complexity and reflexivity.

Here, we’ve taken two preliminary examples (positive feedback and collaboration/coordination) to demonstrate how these perspectives can be brought together to understand enduring policy successes. Table 2 sums up our account of these mechanisms. In each case, the mechanism linking micro-level changes in perceptions, attitudes and behaviour in relation to a particular governance challenges or an existing policy to meso- and macro-level changes in incentive structures, norms and expectations which potentially reinforce (or undermine) the programmatic, process, and political performance of the policy. This endeavor should obviously be pursued on grander scale beyond what is achieved in this paper, which may be done in a number of ways. First, expanding the same structure illustrated in Table 2 by adding to the list of mechanisms considered would provide scholars with examples that might be helpful in theory building. Second, a more ambitious approach would be to instead examine families of theories and their proffered mechanisms through the success lens (those mentioned in, for example, Howlett 2009). Another compelling question to raise following this paper would be whether and how transformational mechanisms can be actively designed, harnessed, and exploited by policy makers and stakeholders to produce policy success. What are policymakers’

'theories in use' as they go about seeking not only to create policies that 'work' but that endure and institutionalize over time?

Cited Sources

- Ansell, Chris, and Alison Gash. 2008. "Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 18(4): 543–71.
- . 2012. "Stewards, Mediators, and Catalysts: Toward a Model of Collaborative Leadership." *Innovation Journal* 17(1): 1–21.
- Ayres, S, ed. 2014. *Rethinking Policy and Politics: Reflections on Contemporary Debates in Policy Studies*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Béland, Daniel. 2010. "Reconsidering Policy Feedback: How Policies Affect Politics." *Administration & Society* 42(5): 568–90. <http://aas.sagepub.com> (July 14, 2017).
- Bovens, Mark, and Paul 't Hart. 1996. *Understanding Policy Fiascoes*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Bovens, Mark, Paul 't Hart, and B. Guy Peters, eds. 2001. *Success and Failure in Public Governance: A Comparative Analysis*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.
- Bovens, Mark, and Paul 't Hart. 2016. "Revisiting the Study of Policy Failures." *Journal of European Public Policy* 1763(August): 0–14.
- Campbell, Andrea L. 2003. *How Politics Make Citizens: Senior Political Activism and the American Welfare State*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- . 2012. "Policy Makes Mass Politics." *Annual Review of Political Science* 15(1): 333–51.
- Cavana, Robert Y., and Edwin D. Mares. 2004. "Integrating Critical Thinking and Systems Thinking: From Premises to Causal Loops." *System Dynamics Review* 20(3): 223–35.
- Chapman, Jake. 2004. *System Failure: Why Governments Must Learn to Think Differently*. 2nd ed. London: Demos.
- Coleman, James. 1990. *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Collander, D, and R Kupers. 2014. *Complexity and the Art of Public Policy: Solving Society's Problems from the Bottom Up*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Compton, Mallory, and Paul 't Hart, eds. *Great Policy Successes: How Governments Get It Right in a Big Way at Least Some of the Time. Or, A Tale About Why It's Amazing That Governments Get So Little Credit for Their Many Everyday and Extraordinary Achievements as Told by Sympathetic Observers Wh*. Utrecht.
- Deutsch, Karl W. 1963. *The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control*. New York: The Free Press.
- Drezner, Daniel W. 2005. "Globalization, Harmonization, and Competition: The Different Pathways to Policy Convergence." *Journal of European Public Policy* 12(5): 841–59.
- Falleti, Tulia G. 2005. "A Sequential Theory of Decentralization: Latin American Cases in Comparative Perspective." *American Political Science Review* 99(4): 327–46.
- Falleti, Tulia G., and Julia F. Lynch. 2009. "Context and Causal Mechanisms in Political Analysis." *Comparative Political Studies* 42(9): 1143–66.

- Fischer, F. 1995. *Evaluating Public Policy*. Chicago: Nelson Hall.
- Forrester, J.W. 1961. *Industrial Dynamics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Givel, Michael. 2010. "The Evolution of the Theoretical Foundations of Punctuated Equilibrium Theory in Public Policy." *Review of Policy Research* 27(2): 187–98.
- Glazer, Amihai, and Lawrence S. Rothenberg. 2001. *Why Government Succeeds and Why It Fails*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Greener, Ian. 2005. "The Potential of Path Dependence in Political Studies." *Politics* 25(1): 62–72.
- Grzymala-Busse, Anna. 2011. "Time Will Tell? Temporality and the Analysis of Causal Mechanisms and Processes." *Comparative Political Studies* 44(9): 1267–97.
- Hall, Peter. 1982. *Great Planning Disasters*. University of California Press.
- Haraldsson, H.V. 2000a. "Introduction to Systems and Causal Loop Diagrams." (January): 1–33.
- . 2000b. *Introduction to Systems and Causal Loop Diagrams, System Analysis Course*. Lund: Lund University.
- Hedstrom, Peter, and Richard Swedberg. 1996. "Social Mechanisms." *Acta Sociologica* 39(3): 281–308.
- van der Heijden, Jeroen, and Johanna Kuhlmann. 2017. "Studying Incremental Institutional Change: A Systematic and Critical Meta-Review of the Literature from 2005 to 2015." *Policy Studies Journal* 45(3): 535–54.
- Howlett, Michael. 2009. "Process Sequencing Policy Dynamics: Beyond Homeostasis and Path Dependency." *Journal of Public Policy* 29(3): 241.
- Howlett, Michael, and Klaus H. Goetz. 2014. "Introduction: Time, Temporality and Timescapes in Administration and Policy." *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 80(3): 477–92.
- Howlett, Michael, and Jeremy Rayner. 2006. "Understanding the Historical Turn in the Policy Sciences: A Critique of Stochastic, Narrative, Path Dependency and Process-Sequencing Models of Policy-Making over Time." *Policy Sciences* 39(1): 1–18.
- Jacobs, Alan M., and R. Kent Weaver. 2015. "When Policies Undo Themselves: Self-Undermining Feedback as a Source of Policy Change." *Governance* 28(4): 441–57.
- Jervis, Robert. 1997. *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jordan, Andrew, and Elah Matt. 2014. "Designing Policies That Intentionally Stick: Policy Feedback in a Changing Climate." *Policy Sciences* 47(3): 227–47.
- Kay, Adrian. 2006. *The Dynamics of Public Policy: Theory and Evidence*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.
- Laitin, David D., and Aaron Wildavsky. 1988. "Political Culture and Political Preferences." *American Political Science Review* 82(2): 589–97.
- Lane, David C. 2008. "The Emergence and Use of Diagramming in System Dynamics : A

- Critical Account.” *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 25: 3–23.
- Leeuw, F.L. 2008. “Gedragmechanismen Achter Overheidsinterventies En Rechtsregels. Intreerede Universiteit Maastricht.”
- Maani, K.E., and Robert Y. Cavana. 2000. *Systems Thinking and Modeling: Understanding Change and Complexity*. Auckland: Pearson Education (NZ).
- Mahoney, James. 2000. “Path Dependence in Historical Sociology.” *Theory and Society* 29(4): 507–48.
- Maruyama, Magoroh. 1963. “The Second Cybernetics: Deviation-Amplifying Mutual Causal Processes.” *American Scientist* 51(2): 164–79.
- Masuch, Michael. 1985. “Vicious Circles in Organizations.” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 30(1): 14–33.
- Mayntz, Renate. 2004. “Mechanisms in the Analysis of Social Macro-Phenomena.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 34(2): 237–59.
- McConnell, Allan. 2010a. “Policy Success, Policy Failure and Grey Areas In-Between.” *Journal of Public Policy* 30(3): 345–62.
- . 2010b. *Understanding Policy Success: Rethinking Public Policy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Merali, Y, and P. Allen. 2011. “Complexity and Systems Thinking.” In *The Sage Handbook of Complexity and Management*, eds. P. Allen, S. Maguire, and B. McKelvey. London: Sage, 31–52.
- Mettler, Suzanne, and Joe Soss. 2004. “The Consequences of Public Policy for Democratic Citizenship: Bridging Policy Studies and Mass Politics.” *Perspectives on Politics* 2(1): 55–73.
- Mettler, Suzanne, and Eric Welch. 2004. “Civic Generation: Policy Feedback Effects of the GI Bill on Political Involvement over the Life Course.” *British Journal of Political Science* 34(3): 497–518.
- Morçöl, G. 2010. “Reconceptualizing Public Policy from the Perspective of Complexity Theory.” *Emergence: A Journal of Complexity Issues in Organizations and Management* 12: 52–60.
- North, Douglass C. 1990. *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Patashnik, Eric M. 2008. *Reforms at Risk: What Happens after Major Policy Changes Are Enacted*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Peirce, W. 1981. *Bureaucratic Failure and Public Expenditure*. New York: Academic Press.
- Perrow, C. 1984. *Normal Accidents*. New York: Basic Books.
- Peters, B. Guy. 2015. *An Advanced Introduction to Public Policy*. Cheltenham: Elgar.
- Peters, B. Guy, Jon Pierre, and Desmond S. King. 2005. “The Politics of Path Dependency: Political Conflict in Historical Institutionalism.” *The Journal of Politics* 67(4): 1275–1300.
- Pierson, Paul. 1993. “When Effect Becomes Cause: Policy Feedback and Political Change.” *World Politics* 45(4): 595–628.

- . 2000. “Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics.” *The American Political Science Review* 94(2): 251–67.
- Richardson, George P. 1986. “Problems with Causal-Loop Diagrams.” *System Dynamics Review* 2(2): 158–70.
- . 1991. *Feedback Thought in Social Science and Systems Theory*. Waltham, MA: Pegasus Communications.
- Richmond, Barry. 1993. “Systems Thinking : Critical Thinking Skills for the 1990s and beyond.” *System Dynamics Review* 9(2): 113–33.
- Rixen, Thomas, and Lora Anne Viola. 2015. “Putting Path Dependence in Its Place: Toward a Taxonomy of Institutional Change.” *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 27(2): 301–23.
- De Roo, G, Van Wezemael J, and J Hillier, eds. 2012. *Complexity and Planning: Systems, Assemblages and Simulations*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Rose, Richard, and Phillip L. Davies. 1994. *Inheritance in Public Policy: Change Without Choice in Britain*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Schuck, P. H. 2014. *Why Government Fails so Often, and How It Can Do Better*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Senge, P.M. 1990. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Century Business.
- Sharman, J. C. 2008. “Power and Discourse in Policy Diffusion : Anti-Money Laundering in Developing States Anti-Money and Discourse Laundering in Policy Diffusion : States in Developing.” *International Studies Quarterly* 52(3): 635–56.
- Sieber, S.D. 1981. *Fatal Remedies: The Ironies of Social Intervention*. New York: Plenum.
- Sorenson, Eva, and Jacob Torfing. 2009. “Making Policy Networks Effective and Democratic Through Metagovernance.” *Public Administration* 87(2): 234–58.
- Soss, Joe, and Sanford F. Schram. 2007. “A Public Transformed? Welfare Reform as Policy Feedback.” *The American Political Science Review* 101(1): 111–27.
- van der Steen, Martijn, Jorren Scherpenisse, Mark van Twist, and Paul ’t Hart. 2015. “How to See Failure: Attempts by the Inspectorate of Education to Detect and Disarm Failure in Dutch Education Policy.” *Public Policy and Administration* 30(3–4): 320–41.
- van der Steen, Martijn, Mark van Twist, Menno Fenger, and Sara Le Cointre. 2013. “Complex Causality in Improving Underperforming Schools: A Complex Adaptive Systems Approach.” *Policy and politics* 41(4): 551–67.
- Steinbruner, John D. 1974. *The Cybernetic Theory of Decision: New Dimensions of Political Analysis*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Teisman, G., A Van Buuren, and L Gerrits. 2009. *Managing Complex Governance Systems*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Thelen, Kathleen. 1999. “Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics.” *Annual Review of Political Science* 2(1): 369–404.

- . 2000. “Timing and Temporality in the Analysis of Institutional Evolution and Change.” *Studies in American Political Development* 14(1): 101–8.
- Toole, T Michael. 2005. “A Project Management Causal Loop Diagram.” In *ARCOM Conference*, London.
- Torfinn, Jacob. 2009. “Rethinking Path Dependence in Public Policy Research.” *Critical Policy Studies* 3(1): 70–83.
- Torfinn, Jacob, B. Guy Peters, Jon Pierre, and Eva Sorenson. 2012. *Interactive Governance: Advancing the Paradigm*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tsingou, Eleni. 2010. “Global Financial Governance and the Developing Anti-Money Laundering Regime: What Lessons for International Political Economy?” *International Politics* 47(6): 617–37.
- Weaver, Kent. 2010. “Paths and Forks or Chutes and Ladders?: Negative Feedbacks and Policy Regime Change.” *Journal of Public Policy* 30(2): 137–62.

Programmatic assessment: <i>Purposeful and valued action</i>	Process assessment: <i>Thoughtful and effective policymaking practices</i>	Political assessment: <i>Stakeholder and public legitimacy for the policy</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A well-developed and empirically feasible <i>public value proposition</i> and <i>theory of change</i> underpins the policy • <i>Achievement</i> of (or considerable momentum towards) the policy's intended and/or of other <i>beneficial social outcomes</i> • Costs/benefits associated with the policy are <i>distributed equitably in society</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The design process ensures carefully considered <i>choice of policy instruments appropriate to context</i> and in a manner that is perceived to be correct and fair • The decision-making process results in firm political commitment and <i>adequate levels of funding, realistic time lines, and administrative capacity</i> • The delivery process effectively and adaptively deploys (mix of) policy instrument(s) to <i>achieve intended outcomes with acceptable costs, and with limited unintended negative consequences</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A relatively broad and deep political <i>coalition</i> supports the policy's value proposition, • Association with the policy <i>enhances the political capital</i> of the responsible policy-makers • <i>Association with the policy enhances the organizational reputation</i> of the relevant public agencies
Endurance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree to which programmatic, process, and political <i>performance is maintained</i> over time • Degree of <i>convergence in perceptions of the policy's value proposition</i> over time • Degree to which the policy confers <i>legitimacy on the broader political system</i> 		

Table 1: Assessing Success in Public Policies, from Compton and 't Hart (n.d.)

		<i>Transformation Mechanism</i>	
		Positive Feedback	Coordination/lock-in
		Policies endure by creating their own constituencies, shifting center of gravity of the policy agenda	Policies produce benefits that increase as others adopt/participate, encouraging further adoption.
<i>Example</i>		The Social Security Act created a political coalition: retired seniors (Campbell 2003).	Gains from convergence in international money laundering regulation (Drezner 2005)
<i>Dimension of Policy Success</i>	Programmatic	Establishment of constituency and implementing institutions generate inertia, increasing the likelihood of continued performance.	Benefits improve over time as stakeholders and actors subsequently adopt the policy.
	Process	Attention and oversight by constituency provides impetus for adequate funding and administrative resources.	Conditional on initial policy design, collaboration can increase participants' willingness to coordinate in policymaking processes.
	Political	Support coalition mobilizes to protect original goals of the policy, and ensures reputational benefits associated with the policy.	Widespread adoption creates a coalition in favor of the status quo, and may legitimize the policy among stakeholders and policy makers.

Table 2: Transformational Mechanisms and Policy Success (descriptions of mechanisms adapted from Falleti and Lynch 2009 and Béland 2010)

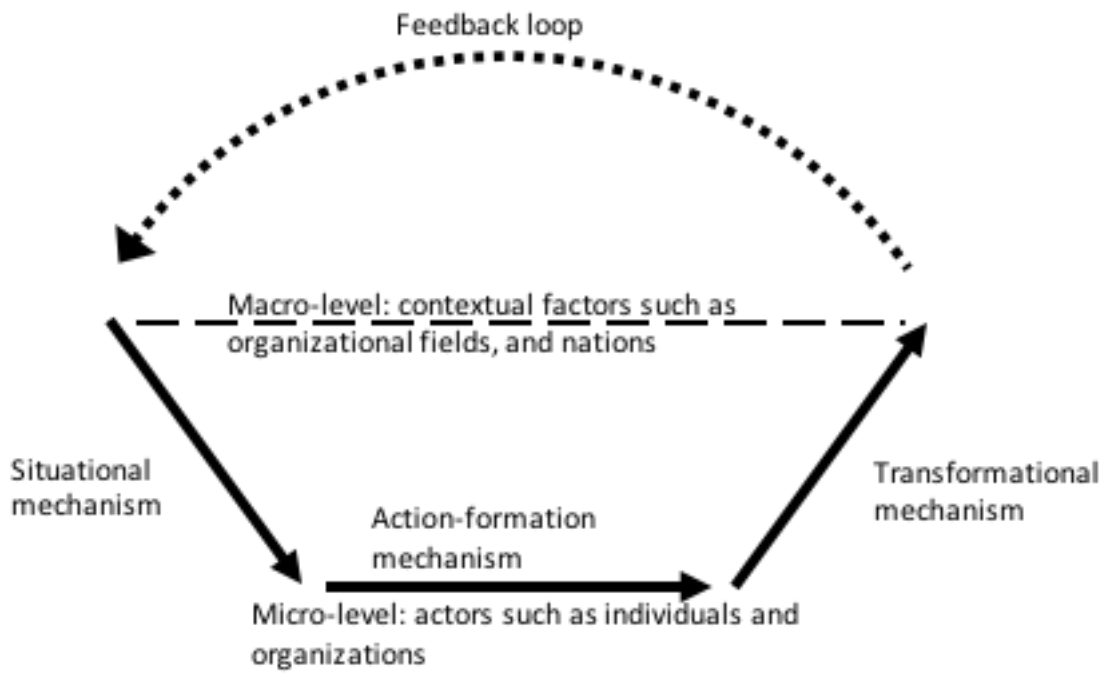


Figure 1: Circular causal loop and macro-micro causal mechanisms

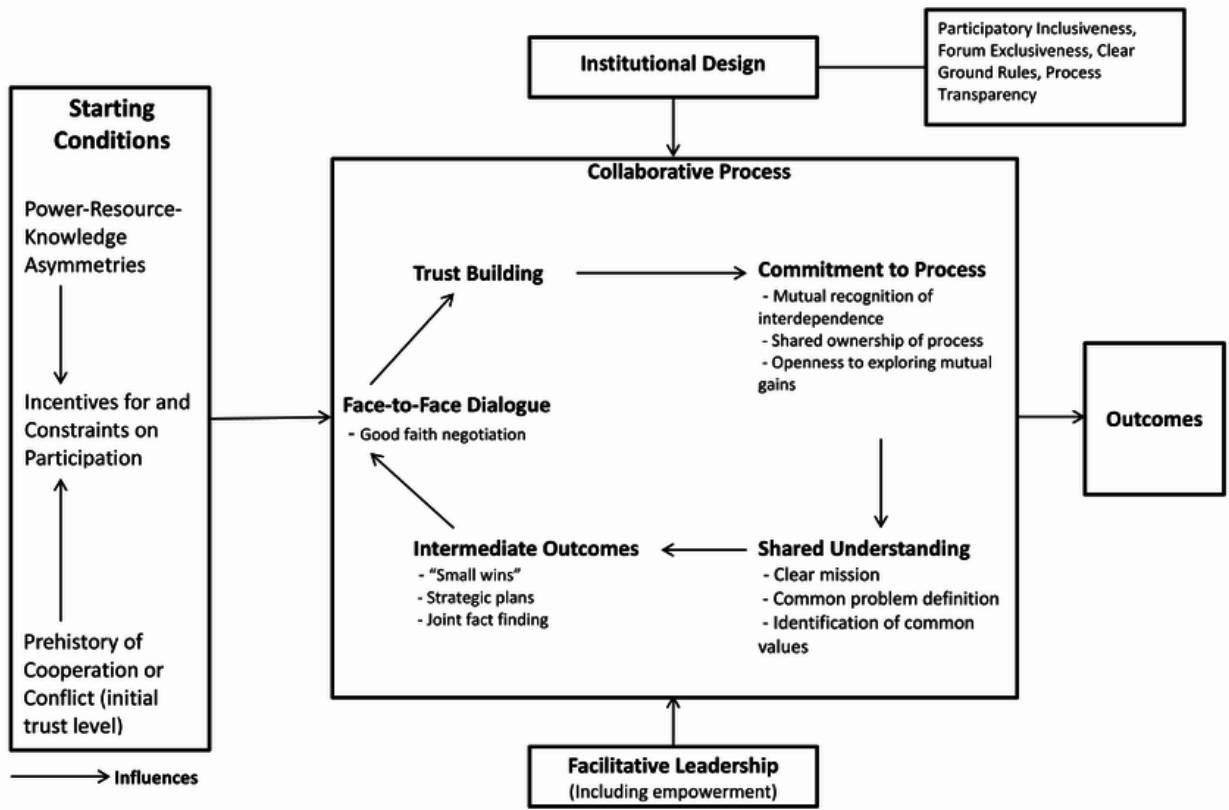


Figure 2. Ansell and Gash's model of collaborative governance

Source: Ansell and Gash (2008), p.550