



# Accelerating small wins for grand societal challenges

The complementarities between mission's directionality and a small wins policy approach for the case of plastic pollution in Dutch waterways

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*Addressing societal problems is a key objective of mission-oriented innovation policy (MIP). However, with its focus on providing a shared goal and direction for problem solving, literature on MIP underexplores the stimulation of corresponding bottom-up innovations. A bottom-up governance strategy that focuses on incremental steps to achieve sustainable results for transformational change is 'small wins'. This policy brief shows how so-called 'propelling mechanisms' can stimulate bottom-up innovations for the case of plastic pollution in Dutch waterways. Analysis of small wins experiences are used to outline two strategies: (1) remove institutional, organizational and knowledge barriers, and (2) reinforce lacking propelling mechanisms for small-scale solutions to grow. The provided insights demonstrate the complementarity between mission directionality and a small wins policy approach.*

## The issue

Current societal challenges, such as climate change, inequality and public health, pose challenges for policy makers when considering appropriate governance strategies. Because of the wicked character of these 'grand challenges', which are characterized by having no directly traceable causes, no clear solutions and being ill-defined (Rittel & Webber, 1973), it becomes increasingly difficult to formulate and develop suitable policy measures. Recently, scholars and policy makers are drawn to *mission-oriented innovation policy* (MIP) as a means to deal with grand societal challenges (Mazzucato, 2018; Wanzenböck et al., 2020). This approach is concentrated on formulating concrete goals and providing direction by policy, yet it lacks integration of bottom-up innovations that arise naturally. *Small wins* is a governance strategy that follows this bottom-up logic, where small-scale innovations are stimulated by so-called *propelling mechanisms* to facilitate transformational change (Termeer & Dewulf, 2019). In this policy brief, we examine the six propelling mechanisms (*energizing, learning by doing, logic of attraction, bandwagon effect, coupling* and *robustness*) being defined as 'chains of events that reinforce themselves through feedback loops ... [to enlarge] an initial small change' (ibid., p.305), and identify strategies for combining them with the directionality that is central to MIP.

## Research design

This study examines bottom-up innovations within the societal problem of plastic pollution in Dutch waterways. For this problem, an ambitious goal resembling a missions-approach was formulated by the

Dutch government, which reads: 'achieving plastic free waterways' (Keijzer, 2019, p.1). This study investigated 17 small-scale innovations that focus on plastic removal measures. In a qualitative study we analyzed policy documents and conducted semi-structured interviews with initiators and supporting actors of bottom-up initiatives, to identify current small wins, potential barriers for growth and stimulating measures with the aim to formulate strategies to accelerate small wins in the future.

## Main findings

The observed bottom-up innovations were characterized by technological, social and regulatory measures that contribute to plastic free waterways in the Netherlands. Despite the Dutch goal that was formulated, a general lack of direction, structure and uniformity was perceived among the actors, which indicates the untapped potential for mission policy. Furthermore, barriers were identified that small wins faced and occasionally failed to overcome while trying to grow. In the small wins analysis we found three types of barriers that prevent small wins from growing: (1) *institutional* (e.g. unfavorable Dutch and European institutions and regulations for implementing plastic removal innovations and the fragmented character of the Netherlands), (2) *organizational* (e.g. employees' resistance to change and laborious inter-organizational partnerships) and (3) *knowledge* (e.g. lack of knowledge transfer and urgency or relevancy of innovations, and knowledge spill overs) barriers. Here, opportunities for mission policy arise to benefit and complement small wins by addressing and removing the identified barriers.

We found that propelling mechanisms are important for accelerating and enabling small wins to flourish locally. However, there is a paucity in the support to upscale and achieve wider impact. Innovations remained relatively small-scale, often faced difficulties going beyond the pilot-phase, and sometimes even had to terminate their actions. This can be attributed to a lack or weakness of particular propelling mechanisms. Specifically, we found that *robustness* and *coupling* across policy domains were absent. Robustness refers to the ‘point of no return’, meaning that small wins are institutionalized and form the new standard. However, because of a lack in policies for plastics in water, and thus poor guidance, innovations remain small and are not legitimized in new practices for plastic removal. Coupling across different policy domains, such as energy and health is not observed as a stimulating measure for plastic pollution innovations and could be further enhanced to achieve transformative change.

Additionally, this research reveals important interlinkages among propelling mechanisms: an increase in one propelling mechanism can interact and thus stimulate or obstruct another mechanism, as illustrated in Figure 1.

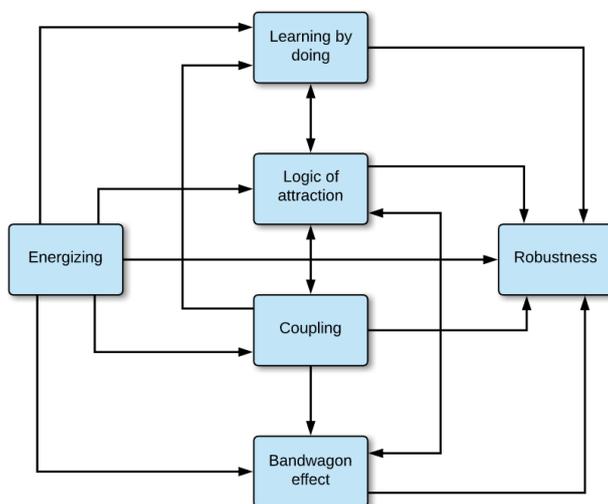


Figure 1: Interlinkages propelling mechanisms

The main initiator of this reinforcing effect is *energizing*, and the main receptor is *robustness*. Since robustness appeared to be lacking from the previous analysis, apparently, the reinforcing effect of the other propelling mechanisms on robustness is not so strong. However, it is expected that in time this reinforcing effect offers opportunities for robustness to be strengthened.

### Policy implications

Although small-scale innovations develop naturally, our research reveals opportunities for MIP to complement the locally emerging small wins. Mission policies can provide the necessary, but so far lacking, direction and coordination for distributed innovations and actors. Hence, policy makers can focus on (1) removing barriers (*institutional, organizational, knowledge*) that restrain growth of small wins, and (2) initiate absent or stimulate underperforming propelling mechanisms. In this way additional guidance can enhance *robustness* and *coupling* across policy domains for small-scale solutions.

To achieve the goal of plastic free waterways, small wins need to be able to grow further. MIP offers promising opportunities to overcome the institutional and knowledge barriers, whereas organizational barriers seem to be more dependent on organization-specific characteristics. More institutional consistency and compatibility among national and international guidelines and regulations for plastic in water would probably enhance the robustness of small wins. Mission policies should focus on ensuring coherent regulation and coordination across governance levels, for instance in form of stronger national or European regulations for plastic in water. To overcome knowledge barriers, networks can be further strengthened, for instance within ‘communities of practice’ devoted to sharing knowledge and experience across policy domains. Stronger actor networks can foster better partnerships, facilitate knowledge transfer and increase the sense of urgency. This can provide small-scale innovations more credibility, visibility and simultaneously stimulate the propelling mechanisms *coupling* and *robustness*.

Recognizing that top-down mission policies and local bottom-up innovations need to work collectively to accelerate progress in tackling persistent societal problems, it appears fruitful to further explore the complementarities of small wins and missions.

### Further reading

This policy brief is based on a Master Thesis, available online. For more information, please refer to <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/396629> or contact the author to request a copy.



## References

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