

# Improving policy analysis and performance governance through outcome-oriented approaches to “localize” the SDG agenda

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## *Super-wicked problems: the need for policy innovation*

In the last two decades, multiple crises have been threatening societal sustainability. Social conflicts, terrorism, poverty, natural catastrophes, marginalization, resource scarcity, economic downturns, and pandemic diseases are a challenge for societal equilibrium.

“Super wicked” problems (Levin et al., 2012) gradually emerge locally to explode globally, and vice versa. Global and local problems are more intertwined than ever. The rising blurriness of the systems where individual stakeholders operate provides a major source of interconnectedness across organizations and regions, which originate performance instability. This requires proper keys and methods for robust policy design and implementation.

To foster consistency on a local, regional, national, and transnational level, and over different time horizons to deal with such problems, scalability and stakeholder collaboration are needed conditions.

“Super wicked” problems are characterized by intrinsic dynamic complexity, due to multi-level, multi-actor, and multi-sectoral challenges (Head & Alford, 2013; Bianchi, 2021). Also, major delays and perception distortions may occur between their identification and a systematic analysis of their causes, leading to consistent policy implementation. Indeed, in designing interventions, policymakers should take into consideration the inconsistencies of policies aimed at tackling problems in the short run and in narrow domains, since they may trigger path-dependent processes that would inertially unfold unintended outcomes, over time and space (Levin et al., 2012).

Framing the dynamic complexity behind community outcomes in such settings requires policy innovation (Sorensen & Torfing, 2017, 828). This implies the involvement of stakeholders from different governance layers in pursuing a common shared view of the feedback structure underlying the observed system performance. To enhance stakeholder learning processes, mutual accountability, shared knowledge, and trust, using innovative outcome-based performance governance methods may play a crucial role. In fact, it may enable modelers/facilitators in the planning process to foster

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stakeholder collaboration and learning (Sorensen & Torfing, 2012, 8) by also enacting feedforward mechanisms through policy implementation (Bianchi, 2021; 2022; Otley, 1999). To this end, using “hybrid” performance regimes (Douglas and Ansell, 2021, p. 956) in the context of collaborative platforms (Ansell and Gash, 2018, p. 20) may enhance learning forums in network performance governance.

Adopting policies based on a proactive system view allows stakeholders to discern how inertial changes can be fostered through earlier decisions, “having both a constraining or ‘lock-in’ effect and an opportunity-enhancing effect” (Bardach, 2008, p. 348). To detect the inertial changes undermining the socio-economic and biological system structure behind such problems, stakeholders should bridge short and long-term perspectives, through robust policy logics that challenge the dominant public values in a society (Osborne, 2010, 418-419) and enhance a sustainable holistic transition (Folke et al, 2003, p. 353; Stokols, 2013).

Implementing this approach major policy innovation entails framing contexts as systems populated by people and institutions, characterized by culture, goals, and perceptions. These are primary causes of societal behavior which impacts local area performance on both an ecological and a socio-economic dimension. Consequently, sustainable structural changes in a city should not be bounded to only physical mutations of its urban infrastructure. They are, instead, an outcome of a systemic change that goes beyond a sum of investments, engineering, and architectural projects for urban regeneration, or the adoption and enforcement of new regulations.

### ***Localizing SDGs: using outcome-oriented approaches in performance governance to improve policy analysis.***

An effort towards addressing the rising concerns on the described super-wicked problems has been made by the United Nations (UN) through the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Agenda.

The 17 SDGs and related 169 targets strive to encourage all nations to tackle these super-wicked problems by stimulating economic growth and enhancing societal needs (such as education, healthcare, social welfare, and employment opportunities), and coping with ecological challenges (such as climate change and biodiversity erosion patterns) (General Assembly, 2015).

The main problems in the UN agenda are associated with the difficulty to detect systemic connections between different SDGs and the related stakeholders who would participate through collaborative policies aimed at achieving them. Also, the SDG agenda does not suggest how the outcomes related to different SDGs could be affected, i.e., through what methods and at what governance levels, final and intermediate outcomes would be identified, gauged, and possibly monitored in the short term through proper performance drivers. Finally, the SDG agenda doesn't shed light on how to identify and gauge the shared strategic resources at context level, which collaborative policies aimed at affecting the SDG outcomes would leverage. Also, ensuring consistency between the planning process at context level and the planning process at organizational level for achieving SDGs may require innovation in performance governance.

Sustainable development and societal resilience need a multidisciplinary approach and multi-actor governance systems across local, national, and international boundaries, but also require the ability to adapt and support change without undermining future flexibility (Perry et al., 2018). This effort cannot be conceived as only bounded to only a scientific dimension. It should be rather transposed to a practitioners' field by involving community stakeholders through innovative and consistent

collaborative planning methods (Ostrom et al., 1999; Folke et al., 2003). To this end, there is a need to foster bottom-up initiatives, by enhancing the interest and participation in collaborative networks by “grassroot” organizations (Smith, 1999; Moore et al., 2007; Foster & Louie, 2010), and other kinds of institutions – e.g.: community-based organizations (Provan & Milward, 2001), backbone organizations (Kania & Kramer, 2011) – as an expression of the civil society participative efforts to generate community wellbeing.

Local government participation and effectiveness in localizing SDGs depends on multilevel governance structures in diverse national settings (Perry et al., 2021). Though translating SDGs into local contexts is a challenging effort, it is a fundamental step to properly frame them on a global scale, to foster policy analysis, goal setting, and joint accountability (Cashore et al 2019).

This requires endogenizing such goals consistently with the specific features of a local context (country, city, region, set of neighborhoods, etc.), in terms of socio-economic, cultural, and ecological systems. Such features contribute at the same time to shape the wicked problems detected at the global level and provide a relevant field where experimentation policies can be designed and implemented at local level. Therefore, endogenizing SDGs is not only associated with the need to cascade such goals from a global to a local level but also to understand the factors (e.g.: culture, history, shared strategic resources, institutions) which explain the local causes behind the global challenges captured in the 2030 UN agenda.

Global indicators would not be applicable at local level without proper data, resources, and capacity, including the use of methodologies enhancing learning in collaborative planning and implementation (Tan et al., 2019). To this end, cross-boundary performance dialogue (Laihonen & Mäntylä, 2017; Moynihan, 2008) may enhance collaborative networking initiatives characterized by long-term collective policy design, to “trigger and nurture path-dependent processes that lead to transformative change over time” (Levin et al, 2012, p. 131). Performance dialogue can act as a fundamental driver of behavioral change in society that may counteract the “irrational discounting” associated with an inclination to mildly perceive the negative future outcomes that the currently – latent, weak, or inconsistent – adopted policies will generate concerning “wicked” problems (Bianchi, 2022).

Also, collaborative networking provides a powerful engine to cope with one of the main challenges that “super-wicked” problems imply: decision-makers in a single public sector organization do not control all the choices required to alleviate the problem.

### ***Research challenges***

The need to move towards long-term sustainability and resilience through a socio-economic, cultural, and ecological transition provides a basis for a workshop aiming at exploring how enhanced and outcome-oriented performance governance approaches may act as an important factor triggering policy innovation to localize and implement SDGs.

A non-exhausting list of topics of which contributions (also including case studies) may refer to the following problematic issues:

- What role can performance governance play in implementing the SDG Agenda at the local level?
- How innovative performance governance methods can boost policy innovation to deal with super-wicked problems at local level?

- How can such innovative approaches to performance governance contribute to generating consistency between different layers of governance in dealing with super-wicked problems to address SDGs?
- What specific challenges localizing SDGs would imply?
- How to link the planning process at context and organizational level for achieving the long-term outcomes set by the 2030 UN Agenda?
- How to outline systemic connections between different SDGs and the related stakeholders to involve in collaborative networks?
- How to foster bottom-up initiatives, by enhancing the interest and participation in collaborative networks by “grassroot”, “community-based” , and other kinds of organizations, as an expression of the civil society participative efforts to generate community wellbeing?
- How to innovate performance governance in a way that the planning process may embrace intangibles (e.g.: trust and shared strategic resources) and delays between causes and effects in policy implementation?
- How can innovative performance governance at local area level enhance leadership and learning processes in collaborative planning for localizing and pursuing SDGs?
- How can innovative performance governance contribute to help policy makers in identifying different outcome layers, their drivers, and the levers on which to act for attaining the targeted SDGs?
- How to foster performance dialogue as a fundamental driver of behavioral change in society to counteract “irrational discounting”?

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