Innovation processes in governance: the making of instruments

Jan-Peter Voß,

Innnovation in Governance Research group, TU Berlin

jan-peter.voss@tu-berlin.de

Abstract

Globally circulating templates for designing policy and governance arrangements are referred to as "instruments" for policy making. As such they guide and legitimate policy-making in the context of various domains. This entails a delegation of agency from democratically regulated policy processes to the making of instruments. By pre-configuring options of policy-making instruments attain a specific power in governance.

With this article we seek to open up the making of instruments for conceptual and empirical analysis. Starting from the question how instruments come into being we briefly review relevant literature. We come up with a proposal to investigate the making of instruments as innovation processes. We infer critical tasks of innovation from the literature in order to provide a heuristic approach for researching case studies. A further element of our heuristic is a distinction between emerging discourses on universal designs for policy-making and situated processes of policy-making in the context of particular domains. Based on this distinction we propose two ideal-typical patterns of innovation as a starting point for case selection: The "realization of phantom instruments" where innovation is driven by the attempt to put theoretically conceived designs into practice and the "rationalization of design practices" where policy instruments emanate from local design practices. We present "emissions trading" and "citizen panels" as two cases that apparently show characteristics of one of the two ideal-types.

A brief report on the results of a study of pathways and dynamics of the historical development of these two instruments reveals that theory- and practice led dynamics are closely entangled. In both cases we observe the formation of "instrument constituencies" as a result of the institutionalization of universal design discourses. Constituencies include specialized organisations and infrastructures which cater for the development of a particular policy instrument. In our two cases, constituencies show different forms of institutionalization and different degrees of integration and dominance with regard to their influence on certain areas of policy-making. A key finding relates to a specific momentum of instrument development emanating from a theoretical discourse of "means" decoupled from political ends and practices in any particular context. This lets us articulate basic problematics of "technologies of governance" as starting points for further research into the power of instruments: First, the tendency of instruments to develop a life of their own, independent of policy problems and goals ("technology out of control"). Second, a disposition for unintended consequences due to a suspension of specific context conditions in devising universal designs ("second order problems"). Third, a displacement of politics from the arenas of democratic decision-making to a discourse of experts ("technocracy").

We conclude by characterizing the making of instruments for governance as a political process that has so far escaped the vision of social and political analysis. This has implications for empirical-analytical explanations of governance change, for critical-emancipatory concerns with the democratization of policy design, as well as for practical-strategic approaches seeking to give advice on how to do innovation in governance.