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FROM POLICY IMPLEMENTATION TO POLICY CHANGE: A PERSONAL ODYSSEY

1. INTRODUCTION

Building upon the pioneering work of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), the decade from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s represented the 'golden era' of implementation research in OECD countries. This was the period of the development of 'top-down' implementation frameworks by Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) and Sabatier and Mazmanian (1979, 1983). That work stimulated a wave of 'bottom-up' critiques by Hjern and Hull (1982), Barrett and Fudge (1981), Berman (1978) and Hanf and Scharpf (1978). *Great Expectations and Mixed Performance: The Implementation of Higher Education Reforms in Europe*, by Ladislav Cerych and myself, was published in 1986, at the end of this period.

The purpose of this conference, as I understand it, is to assess the field of implementation studies of higher education reforms since the *Great Expectations* book: What has happened to implementation theory? Are scholars still engaged in the top-down/bottom-up debate, or has some new conceptual framework come to the fore? What have we learned about the factors affecting the implementation of higher education reforms?

In this chapter, I shall first review the implementation literature and the broader 'policy cycle' or 'stages heuristic' out of which it emerged. I shall then discuss the development and basic principles of the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF), which represents my attempt to synthesise the advantages of the 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches to implementation research in order to understand policy change over periods of a decade or more. Finally, I shall discuss the implications of the ACF for the study of higher education policy.

2. IMPLEMENTATION STUDIES: CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Implementation scholars during the 1970s and 1980s made some important contributions to our understanding of policy implementation and the broader policy process. Much of this was a product of the debate between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches to implementation studies. While applied research has continued, in my view the field essentially ground to a halt in the late 1980s, at least at a theoretical level. There have been several attempts to revive it (Matland 1995; Lester and Goggin 1998; De Leon and De Leon 2002), but none appears to have

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been successful. In this section, I first review the broader stages heuristic out of which implementation research emerged, and then focus on the top-down/bottom-up debate.

2.1. The Policy Cycle/Stages Heuristic

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the most influential framework for understanding the policy process – particularly among American scholars – was what Nakamura (1987) termed 'the textbook approach', what May and Wildavsky (1978) termed 'the policy cycle', and what I have termed 'the stages heuristic' (Sabatier 1991). As developed by Lasswell (1971), Jones (1970), Anderson (1975) and Brewer and De Leon (1983), it divided the policy process into a series of stages – usually agenda setting, policy formulation and legitimation, implementation and evaluation – and discussed some of the factors affecting the process within each stage. The stages heuristic served a useful purpose in the 1970s and early 1980s by dividing the very complex policy process into discrete stages and by stimulating some excellent research within specific stages – particularly agenda setting (Cobb, Ross and Ross 1976; Kingdon 1984; Nelson 1984) and policy implementation (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Hjern and Hull 1982; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983).

The stages heuristic has, however, been subjected to some rather devastating criticisms (Nakamura 1987; Sabatier 1991; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993, 1999):

- It is not really a causal theory since it never identifies a set of causal drivers that govern the process within and across stages. Instead, work within each stage has tended to develop on its own, almost totally oblivious to research in other stages.
- The proposed sequence of stages is often descriptively inaccurate. For example, evaluations of existing programmes affect agenda setting, and policy formulation/legitimation occurs as bureaucrats attempt to implement vague legislation (Nakamura 1987).
- The stages heuristic has a very legalistic, top-down bias in which the focus is typically on the passage and implementation of a major piece of legislation. This neglects the interaction of the implementation and evaluation of numerous pieces of legislation – none of them pre-eminent – within a given policy domain (Hjern and Hull 1982; Sabatier 1986). The assumption of a single policy cycle focused around a major piece of legislation oversimplifies the usual process of *multiple, interacting cycles* involving numerous policy proposals and statutes at multiple levels of government. In such a situation – which is common – focusing on '*a* policy cycle' makes very little sense.

The last point in particular led me to conclude that the stages heuristic was fundamentally flawed, even though much of the work on policy implementation was quite useful. The stages heuristic needed to be replaced with a framework that sought to explain an overall policy process within a given policy domain that would usually be composed of a variety of initiatives at different stages of the policy cycle.

2.2. Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches to Implementation Analysis

2.2.1. The Top-Down Perspective

The essential features of a top-down approach were developed by Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), starting with a definition of 'implementation' as 'the carrying out of a policy decision'. This approach starts with a policy decision by governmental (often central government) officials and then asks (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983):

- To what extent were the actions of implementing official and target groups consistent with (the objectives and procedures outlined in) that policy decision?
- To what extent were the objectives attained over time, that is, to what extent were the impacts consistent with the objectives?
- What were the principal factors affecting policy outputs and impacts, both those relevant to the official policy as well as other politically significant ones?
- How was the policy reformulated over time on the basis of experience?

The Sabatier and Mazmanian framework (1979) was probably the most detailed of the top-down approaches. It first identified a variety of legal, political and 'tractability' variables affecting the different stages of the implementation process. It then sought to synthesise this large number of variables into a shorter list of six sufficient and generally necessary conditions for the effective implementation of legal objectives:

1. *Clear and consistent objectives*. Taken from Van Meter and Van Horn (1975), clear legal objectives were viewed as providing both a clear standard of evaluation and an important legal resource to implementing officials.
2. *Adequate causal theory*. Borrowing the fundamental insight of Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) that policy interventions incorporate an implicit theory about how to effectuate social change, Sabatier and Mazmanian provided some useful guidelines about how to ascertain the adequacy of the causal theory behind a policy reform.
3. *Implementation process legally structured to enhance compliance by implementing officials and target groups*. Borrowing again from Pressman and Wildavsky (1973), the authors pointed to a variety of legal mechanisms including the number of veto points involved in programme delivery, the sanctions and incentives available to overcome resistance, and the assignment of programmes to implementing agencies which would be supportive and give them high priority.
4. *Committed and skilful implementing officials*. Recognising the unavoidable discretion given implementing officials, their commitment to policy objectives and skill in utilising available resources were viewed as critical (Lipsky 1971; Lazin 1973). While this could partially be determined by the initial statute, much of it was a product of post-statutory political forces.

5. *Support of interest groups and sovereigns over time*. This simply recognised the need to maintain political support from interest groups and from legislative and executive sovereigns throughout the long implementation process (Downs 1967; Murphy 1973; Bardach 1974; Sabatier 1975).
6. *Changes in socio-economic conditions which do not substantially undermine political support or causal theory*. This variable simply recognised that changes in socio-economic conditions, for example, the Arab oil boycott or the Vietnam War, could have dramatic repercussions on the political support or causal theory of a programme (Hofferbert 1974; Aaron 1978).

In short, the first three conditions can be dealt with by the initial policy decision (e.g. a statute), whereas the latter three are largely the product of political and economic pressures during the subsequent implementation process.

In the five years following the 1979 publication of the framework, Sabatier and Mazmanian sought to have it tested – by themselves and others – in a variety of policy areas and political systems. The framework was critically applied to at least twenty cases (Sabatier 1986), including several involving environmental policy in the US and the seven higher education reforms in Europe that were published in the *Great Expectations* book. What did they find?

First, the emphasis of the framework on legal structuring of the implementation process – one of its major innovations – has been confirmed in numerous studies. This is particularly gratifying since one of the most frequent criticisms of the framework was that the emphasis on legal structuring is unrealistic, that is, that the cognitive limitations of policy makers and the need for compromise at the formulation stage preclude careful structuring (Majone and Wildavsky 1978; Barrett and Fudge 1981). The evidence suggests that, while fairly coherent structuring is difficult, it occurs more frequently than critics realise and, when present, proves to be very important.

Likewise, two of the major contributions borrowed from Pressman and Wildavsky (1973) – veto points and causal theory – were confirmed in many studies. For example, the much greater success of the British Open University than the French IUTs (*Instituts Universitaires de Technologie*) in reaching projected enrolments can be partially attributed to the better theory utilised by policy formulators in the former case (Cerych and Sabatier 1986).

Perhaps the best evidence of the potential importance of legal structuring is that the two most successful cases studied to date – the California coastal commissions (at least during the first decade) and the British Open University – were also the best designed institutions. That is, they structured the process to provide reasonably consistent objectives, a good causal theory, relatively few veto points, sympathetic implementing officials, access of supporters to most decisions and adequate financial resources.

Second, the relatively manageable list of variables and the focus in the framework on the formulation-implementation-reformulation cycle encouraged many of our case authors to look at a longer time-frame than was true of earlier

implementation studies (i.e. ten years instead of four). This, in turn, led to a discovery of the importance of learning by programme proponents over time as they became aware of deficiencies in the original programme and sought improved legal and political strategies for dealing with them. For example, the supporters of the French IUTs greatly improved their understanding of the factors affecting student choice over time (Cerych and Sabatier 1986).

Third, our focus on legally mandated objectives – particularly when combined with the ten-year time span for assessing programme effectiveness – helped produce a less pessimistic evaluation of governmental performance than was true of the first generation of implementation studies. On the one hand, the focus on legally mandated objectives encouraged scholars to carefully distinguish the objectives contained in legal documents from the political rhetoric surrounding policy formulation – the criticism of the 'failure' of the Open University to meet the needs of working class students being a case in point. In addition, the longer time-frame used in many of these studies meant that several which were initially regarded as failures – US compensatory education and the French IUTs – were regarded in a more favourable light after proponents had had the benefit of a decade of learning and experimentation (Kirst and Jung 1982; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983; Cerych and Sabatier 1986).

2.2.2. Criticisms of the Top-Down Perspective

Despite these strengths, several years' experience with testing the Sabatier/ Mazmanian framework has also revealed some significant flaws.

First, the focus placed on 'clear and consistent policy objectives' needs to be reconceptualised. Experience has confirmed the critics' charge that very few programmes meet this very demanding criterion, either initially or after a decade (Majone and Wildavsky 1978; MacIntyre 1985). Instead, the vast majority incorporate a multitude of partially conflicting objectives. This does not, however, preclude the possibility for assessing programme effectiveness. Instead, it simply means that effectiveness needs to be reconceptualised into the 'acceptability space' demarcated by the intersection of the ranges of acceptable values on each of the multiple evaluative dimensions involved. This can be illustrated by the case of the Norwegian regional colleges: they were supposed to serve students from the local region and to foster regionally relevant research at the same time that they were also mandated to be part of a national educational system in which the transfer of student credits among institutions and the evaluation of faculty research by peers in other institutions had to be protected. While the institutions after a decade were receiving 'excellent' ratings on very few of these dimensions, the evidence suggests they were satisfactory on all of them (Cerych and Sabatier 1986).

On a related point, most implementation scholars have followed Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) in assuming that, *ceteris paribus*, the probability of effective implementation of a reform is inversely related to the extent of envisaged departure from the status quo ante. One of the most significant conclusions of the *Great Expectations* book was that the relationship is not linear but rather curvilinear. They suggest that very incremental reforms – for example, the Swedish 25/5 Scheme for

adult admission to universities – simply do not arouse enough commitment to get much done, while those such as the German Gesamthochschulen which envisage a comprehensive reform of the entire system arouse too much resistance to get off the ground. Instead, those reforms – for example, the British Open University – which are ambitious enough to arouse intense commitment from proponents but are rather limited in their effects on the entire higher education system stand the best chance of success.

Second, while Sabatier and Mazmanian encouraged a longer time-frame and provided several examples of policy-oriented learning by proponents over time, their framework did not provide a good conceptual vehicle for looking at policy change over periods of a decade or more (Goodwin and Moen 1981; Browning, Marshall and Tabb 1984; Goggin 1984; Lowry 1985). This is primarily because, as we shall see below, it focused too much on the perspective of programme proponents, thereby neglecting the strategies (and learning) by other actors. This was a major flaw in the Sabatier/Mazmanian model which hopefully was improved by the ACF.

The assessment thus far has been from the point of view of Sabatier/Mazmanian or other sympathisers of a top-down perspective. It is now time to examine the more fundamental methodological criticisms raised by 'bottom-uppers'.

2.2.3. The Bottom-Up Perspective

The fundamental flaw in top-down models, according to Hjern and Hull (1982), Hanf (1982), Barrett and Fudge (1981), Elmore (1979) and other bottom-uppers, is that they start from the perspective of (central) decision makers and thus tend to neglect other actors. Their methodology leads top-downers to assume that the framers of the policy decision (e.g. statute) are the key actors and that others are basically impediments. This, in turn, leads them to neglect strategic initiatives coming from the private sector, from local implementing officials and from other policy subsystems. While Sabatier and Mazmanian are not entirely guilty of this – in particular, their focus on causal theory and hierarchical integration encourages the analyst to examine the perspectives of other actors – this is certainly a potential Achilles heel of their model.

A second, and related, criticism of top-down models is that they are difficult to use in situations where there is no dominant policy (statute) or agency, but rather a multitude of governmental directives and actors, none of them pre-eminent. As this is often the case, particularly in social service delivery, this is a very telling criticism. While Sabatier and Mazmanian can recognise such situations – through the concepts of (inadequate) causal theory and (poor) hierarchical integration – they have very little ability to predict the outcome of such complex situations except to say that the policy they are interested in will probably not be effectively implemented.

A third criticism of top-down models is that they are likely to ignore, or at least underestimate, the strategies used by street-level bureaucrats and target groups to get around central policy and/or to divert it to their own purposes (Weatherly and Lipsky 1977; Elmore 1978; Berman 1978). A related point is that such models are likely to neglect many of the counterproductive effects of the policies chosen for

analysis. While a really skilful top-downer can attempt to deal with such deficiencies, there is little doubt that these, too, are important criticisms.

The bottom-uppers were able to advance some telling arguments against the top-down approach. Have they also been able to accomplish the more difficult task of developing a more viable alternative?

The bottom-up approach of Hanf, Hjern and Porter (1978) starts by identifying the network of actors involved in service delivery in one or more local areas and asks them about their goals, strategies, activities and contacts. It then uses the contacts as a vehicle for developing a networking technique to identify the local, regional and national actors involved in the planning, financing and execution of the relevant governmental and non-governmental programmes. This provides a mechanism for moving from street-level bureaucrats (the 'bottom') up to the 'top' policy makers in both the public and private sectors (Hanf, Hjern and Porter 1978; Hjern and Porter 1981; Hjern and Hull 1982).

The approach developed by Hanf, Hjern and Porter (1978) has several notable strengths.

First, they have developed an explicit and replicable methodology for identifying a policy network ('implementation structure'). In the small firms study, for example, they started with a random sample of firms in an area, and then interviewed key officials in each firm to ascertain their critical problems, the strategies developed to deal with each, and the persons contacted to execute each of those strategies. They then used those contacts via a networking technique to identify the 'implementation structure' (Hull and Hjern 1987). It is this intersubjectively reliable methodology which separates Hanf, Hjern and Porter from the vast majority of bottom-up (and even top-down) researchers.

Second, because Hanf, Hjern and Porter do not begin with a governmental programme but rather with actors' perceived problems and the strategies developed for dealing with them, they are able to assess the relative importance of a variety of governmental programmes *vis-à-vis* private organisations and market forces in solving those problems. In contrast, a top-down approach is likely to overestimate the importance of the governmental programme which is its focus. For example, Hanf's (1982) bottom-up analysis of pollution control in the Netherlands concluded that energy policies and the market price of alternative fuels had more effect on firms' air pollution control programmes than did governmental pollution control programmes – a conclusion which would have been difficult for a top-downer to reach.

Third, this approach is able to deal with a policy/problem area involving a multitude of public (and private) programmes, none of them pre-eminent. In contrast, such cases present substantial difficulties for top-down approaches.

For all these strengths, however, the Hanf, Hjern and Porter approach also has its limitations.

First, just as top-downers are in danger of overemphasising the importance of the centre *vis-à-vis* the periphery, bottom-uppers are likely to overemphasise the ability of the periphery to frustrate the centre. More specifically, the focus on actors' goals and strategies – the vast majority of whom are at the periphery – may underestimate the centre's indirect influence over those goals and strategies through its ability to

affect the institutional structure in which individuals operate (Kiser and Ostrom 1982). In short, one of the most basic shortcomings of the Hanf, Hjern and Porter approach is that it takes the present distribution of preferences and resources as given, without ever inquiring into the efforts of other actors to structure the rules of the game.

Second, Hanf, Hjern and Porter fail to start from an explicit theory of the factors affecting its subject of interest. Because their approach relies very heavily on the perceptions and activities of participants, it is their prisoner. Their networking methodology is a useful starting point for identifying many of the actors involved in a policy area, but it needs to be related via an explicit theory to social, economic and legal factors which structure the perceptions, resources and participation of those actors.

2.3. Attempts at a Synthesis: An American Perspective

Since 1986, there have been at least four attempts in the US to synthesise some of the best features of the top-down and bottom-up approaches into a new conceptual framework of the implementation process. There may have been additional efforts in other OECD countries, but I am simply not aware of them.

The first such effort was by Richard Elmore (1985), right at the end of the 'golden era'. He combined his previous work on 'backward mapping' – one of the bottom-up classics – with what he termed 'forward mapping', essentially a top-down perspective. He argues that policy makers need to consider both the policy instruments and other resources at their disposal (forward mapping) and the incentive structure of ultimate target groups (backward mapping) because programme success is contingent on meshing the two. Elmore's paper is primarily concerned with aiding policy practitioners by indicating the need to use multiple perspectives in designing and implementing policies. At that very practical level, it is excellent. It does not purport, however, to provide a model of the policy process which can be used by social scientists to explain outcomes in a wide variety of settings.

The second attempt at synthesis was made by Malcolm Goggin et al. (1990). They developed a communications model of intergovernmental implementation in the US. In their views, states are the critical actors. They receive messages from both 'the top' (the federal government) and 'the bottom' (local actors). Goggin et al. applied their framework to a number of cases, but, to my knowledge, no one else has seriously applied it. In the late 1990s, Lester and Goggin (1998) stimulated a brief flurry of essays on implementation research, but no new theoretical syntheses and no programme of empirical research.

Midway through the 1990s, Richard Matland (1995) sought to combine top-down and bottom-up approaches by arguing that they were applicable to four different situations:

- In situations of low goal conflict and low technical ambiguity, 'administrative implementation' is the appropriate strategy. This was

essentially a top-down approach. As long as resources are provided, implementation should be relatively straightforward.

- In situations of high goal conflict and low technical ambiguity, actors know how to accomplish policy objectives but they cannot agree on the appropriate objectives. He terms this, 'political implementation'. Again, a top-down model is appropriate once policy makers can decide on the appropriate goals.
- In situations of high technical ambiguity and low goal conflict, the emphasis should be on facilitating learning – what Matland terms 'experimental implementation'.
- In situations of high goal conflict and high technical ambiguity, coming to agreement on anything is extremely difficult. Letting local actors find local solutions (essentially the bottom-up perspective) is appropriate. He terms this 'symbolic implementation'.

Unfortunately, to my knowledge, no one – including Matland – has seriously applied Matland's framework.

More recently, De Leon and De Leon (2002) have called for a revival of implementation research using essentially a bottom-up approach but linking it more closely to prospects for public participation.

To the best of my knowledge, none of these post-1985 attempts at synthesising top-down and bottom-up approaches has stimulated the development of a coherent theory linked to programmes of empirical research by a body of scholars. In Lakatos' (1978) terminology, then, none of them represents a 'progressive research programme'.

All is not bleak, however. For a fifth approach, the ACF was developed in the late 1980s as an explicit effort to combine the best features of top-down and bottom-up approaches to implementation research with contributions from a number of other literatures, mainly social psychology and policy subsystems. It is a relatively coherent theory which is constantly expanding and which has stimulated approximately 35 applications by a wide variety of scholars (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999). It is to the ACF that we now turn.

3. AN ADVOCACY COALITION FRAMEWORK OF POLICY CHANGE

One of the major contributions of Mazmanian and Sabatier (1983) was their contention that the relatively short time span (4–5 years) used in most implementation studies was inadequate. Not only did it lead to premature judgments concerning programme failure, but it also missed some very important features of the policy process, namely, the extent of policy-oriented learning. While this top-down approach did a good job of illustrating learning by reform proponents, its top-down assumptions made it difficult to focus equally on learning by opponents. This deficiency can be remedied, however, by investigating bottom-uppers' strategies for improving goal attainment. This points to a synthesis which combines top-down and bottom-up approaches in the analysis of policy change over periods of a decade or more.

3.1. Elements of the Synthesis

The elements of such a conceptual framework are at hand. Consistent with the bottom-uppers, one needs to start from a policy problem or subsystem – rather than a law or other policy decision – and then examine the strategies employed by relevant actors in both the public and private sectors at various levels of government as they attempt to deal with the issue consistent with their objectives. The networking technique developed by Hanf, Hjern and Porter can be one of the methods for determining the actors in a subsystem, although it needs to be combined with other approaches to include the actors who are *indirectly* involved.

Likewise, the concerns of top-down theorists with the manner in which legal and socio-economic factors structure behavioural options need to be incorporated into the synthesis, as do their concerns with the validity of the causal assumptions behind specific programmes and strategies. This leads to a focus on (1) the effects of socio-economic (and other) changes external to the policy network/subsystem on actors' resources and strategies; (2) the attempts by various actors to manipulate the legal attributes of governmental programmes in order to achieve their objectives over time; and (3) actors' efforts to improve their understanding of the magnitude and factors affecting the problem – as well as the impacts of various policy instruments – as they learn from experience.

Attention thus shifts from policy implementation to policy change involving numerous policy initiatives over a period of 10–20 years. The longer time span creates, however, a need to aggregate actors into a manageable number of groups if the researcher is to avoid severe information overload. After examining several options, the most useful principle of aggregation seems to be by belief system. This produces a focus on 'advocacy coalitions', that is, actors from various public and private organisations who share a set of beliefs and who engage in a non-trivial degree of coordinated behaviour in order to realise their common goals over time.

In short, the synthesis adopts the bottom-uppers' unit of analysis – a whole variety of public and private actors involved with a policy problem – as well as their concerns with understanding the perspectives and strategies of all major categories of actors, not simply programme proponents. It then combines this starting point with top-downers' concerns with the manner in which socio-economic conditions and legal instruments constrain behaviour. It applies this synthesised perspective to the analysis of policy change over periods of a decade or more. This time-frame is required to deal with the role of policy-oriented learning – a topic identified as critical in several top-down studies. Finally, the synthesis adopts the intellectual style (or methodological perspective) of many top-downers in its willingness to utilise fairly abstract theoretical constructs and to operate from an admittedly simplified portrait of reality.

3.2. Overview of the Framework

The ACF starts from the premise that the most useful aggregate unit of analysis for understanding policy change in modern industrial societies is not any specific governmental organisation but rather a policy subsystem, that is, those actors from a

variety of public and private organisations who are actively concerned with a policy problem or issue, such as higher education (Heclo 1974; Jordan and Richardson 1983; Milward and Wamsley 1984; Rose 1984; Sharpe 1985).

Figure 1. 1998 diagram of the Advocacy Coalition Framework

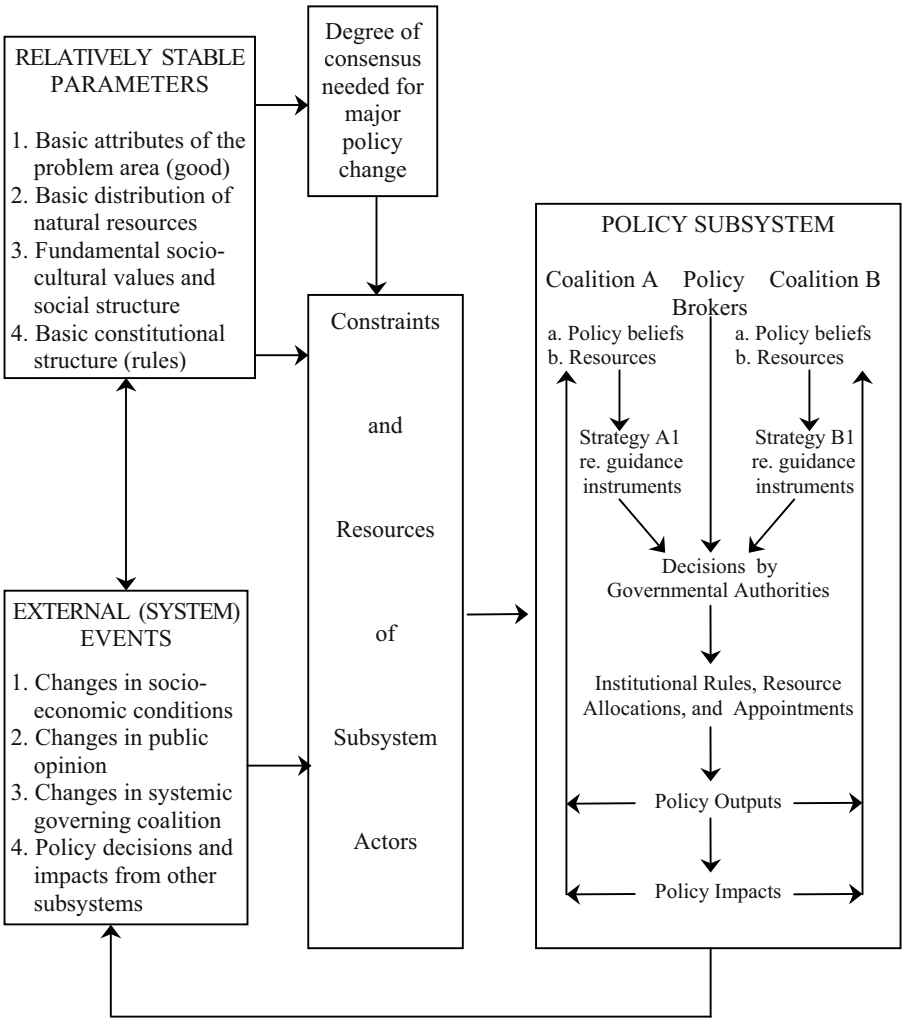

Figure 1 presents a general overview of the framework. On the left side are two sets of exogenous variables – the one fairly stable, the other dynamic – which affect the constraints and resources of subsystem actors. Higher education policy, for example, is strongly affected by very stable factors, such as the overall income and

educational levels in a society, plus cultural norms about elitist vs. egalitarian strategies governing access to higher education. But there are also more dynamic factors, including changes in socio-economic conditions and in system-wide governing coalitions, which provide some of the principal sources of policy change. These are all features drawn from top-down models which 'structure' policy making.

Within the subsystem, the framework draws heavily upon the bottom-up approach. It assumes, however, that actors can be aggregated into a number of advocacy coalitions – each composed of politicians, agency officials, interest group leaders and intellectuals who share a set of normative and causal beliefs on core policy issues. At any particular point in time, each coalition adopts a strategy(s) envisaging one or more changes in governmental institutions perceived to further its policy objectives. Conflicting strategies from different coalitions are mediated by a third group of actors, here termed 'policy brokers', whose principal concern is to find some reasonable compromise which will reduce intense conflict. The end result is legislation or governmental decrees establishing or modifying one or more governmental action programmes at the collective choice level (Kiser and Ostrom 1982; Page 1985). These in turn produce policy outputs at the operational level (e.g. graduation rates in different disciplines). These outputs at the operational level, mediated by a number of other factors (most notably, the validity of the causal theory underlying the programme), result in a variety of impacts on targeted problem parameters (e.g. employment patterns of higher education graduates), as well as side effects.

At this point, the framework requires additional elements not central to the implementation literature. By far the most important of these is the ACF's model of the individual, that is, its assumptions about actors' goals, information processing capabilities and decision rules. First, in contrast to frameworks drawn from micro-economics, the ACF does not assume that all actors seek to maximise their self-interest all the time. Instead, it argues this is an empirical question, but clearly allows for the possibility of some concern for collective welfare. Second, consistent with Simon's (1979) work on bounded rationality, the ACF assumes that actors have only a limited capacity to process information and thus seek to use all sorts of simplifying 'heuristics'. Third, consistent with the literature on cognitive dissonance and biased assimilation (Festinger 1957; Lord, Ross and Lepper 1979), the ACF assumes that actors perceive the world through a set of beliefs that filter in information consistent with pre-existing beliefs and filter out dissonant information. This makes belief change difficult. In addition, it means that actors with different perceptual filters will perceive the same piece of information in different ways. This, in turn, leads to suspicion about opponents' intellectual integrity, reasonableness and capacity to engage in reasoned argument. Finally, the ACF adopts the central proposition of prospect theory (Quattrone and Tversky 1988), namely that actors value loses more than gains. This means that actors will remember defeats more than victories and, in turn, exaggerate the power of opponents. Combining the last two points results in 'the devil shift', the proposition that actors in a political conflict view opponents as more nefarious, less reasonable and more powerful than they probably are (Sabatier, Hunter and McLaughlin 1987). That, in turn, exacerbates the

potential for belief change and compromise across coalitions (who, by definition, are composed of actors with different beliefs).

Some aspects of public policy clearly change far more frequently than others. In order to get a conceptual handle on this, the framework distinguishes the core from the secondary aspects of a belief system or a governmental action programme. Recall that coalitions are seeking to get their beliefs translated into governmental programmes, so the two concepts can be analysed in similar categories. The extent to which a specific programme incorporates the beliefs of any single coalition is, however, an empirical question and will reflect the relative power of that coalition within the subsystem.

The ACF conceptualises the belief systems of policy elites as a tripartite structure. At the deepest and broadest level are *deep core beliefs.* These involve very general normative and ontological assumptions about human nature, the relative priority of fundamental values such as liberty and equality, the relative priority of the welfare of different groups, the proper role of government vs. markets in general (i.e. across all policy subsystems), and beliefs about who should participate in governmental decision making. The traditional Left/Right scales operate at the deep core level. Largely the product of childhood socialisation, deep core beliefs are very difficult to change. At the next level are *policy core beliefs.* These are applications of deep core beliefs to an entire policy subsystem, such as French higher education policy, and include such topics as the priority of different values, whose welfare counts, the relative authority of governments and markets, the proper roles of the general public, elected officials, civil servants, experts, etc., and the relative seriousness and causes of policy problems in the subsystem as a whole. The general assumption is that policy elites are very knowledgeable about relationships within their policy subsystem and thus may be willing to adjust the application of certain deep core beliefs to that subsystem. For example, while American conservatives generally have a strong preference for market solutions, many of them recognise the desirability of state-funded mass higher education institutions. Because policy core beliefs are subsystem-wide in scope and deal with fundamental policy choices, they are also very difficult to change. The final level consists of *secondary beliefs.* Secondary beliefs are relatively narrow in scope (less than subsystem-wide) and address, for example, detailed rules and budgetary applications within a specific programme, the seriousness and causes of problems in a specific locale, public participation guidelines within a specific statute, etc. Because secondary beliefs are narrower in scope than policy core beliefs, changing them requires less evidence and fewer agreements among subsystem actors and thus should be less difficult.

The ACF argues that legislators, agency officials, interest group leaders, researchers, and intellectuals with similar policy core beliefs will form an advocacy coalition in an effort to coordinate their behaviour and bring about changes in public policy. In any given policy subsystem, there may be 2–5 advocacy coalitions. Among members of a given coalition, trust is common and belief change is relatively easy on secondary beliefs. Given the 'devil shift', however, belief change *across* coalitions is hypothesised to be extremely difficult. Thus there is a strong tendency for coalitions to be rather stable over periods of a decade or more. In fact, until recently, the ACF argued that major (policy core) policy change within a

subsystem would occur *only* when significant perturbations from other policy areas or socio-economic conditions changed the resources or the core beliefs of major actors, and essentially led to the replacement of the previously dominant coalition by a previously minority coalition (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993: 34).

While changes in the policy core are usually the result of external perturbations, changes in the secondary aspects of a governmental action programme are often the result of policy-oriented learning by various coalitions or policy brokers. Following Heclo (1974: 306), policy-oriented learning refers to relatively enduring alterations of thought or behavioural intentions which result from experience and which are concerned with the attainment or revision of policy objectives. Policy-oriented learning involves the internal feedback loops depicted in figure 1, as well as increased knowledge of the state of problem parameters and the factors affecting them. Since the vast majority of policy debates involve secondary aspects of a governmental action programme – in part because actors realise the futility of challenging core assumptions – such learning can play an important role in policy change. In fact, a principal concern of the framework is to analyse the institutional conditions conducive to such learning and the cases in which cumulative learning may lead to changes in the policy core.

A more extensive exposition of the ACF can be found in Sabatier (1998) and Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999). This overview should, however, indicate how it synthesises important elements from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives within the implementation literature, and combines them with a model of the individual drawn heavily from social psychology.

4. IS THE ACF USEFUL IN UNDERSTANDING HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS IN EUROPE AND ELSEWHERE?

The ACF was designed to deal with what Hoppe and Peterse (1993) have termed 'wicked' policy issues, that is, those characterised by high goal conflict, high technical uncertainty about the nature and causes of the problem, and a large number of actors from multiple levels of government. As of 1999, the ACF had been applied to at least 34 published cases, most of them energy, environmental or social policy disputes involving goal conflict, technical uncertainty and intergovernmental actors (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999: 126; Sabatier 1998: 100). None of them involved higher education reforms. Why? While I obviously cannot provide any definitive answers, let me offer a few speculations:

- My perception is that most higher education reforms do not involve high goal conflict and competing belief systems. Instead, almost everyone views expanding higher education as desirable, but they disagree on the distribution of resources to different institutions or programmes. The exception are disputes with high potential for class conflict, for example, the German gesamthochschulen or affirmative action programmes designed to increase access to underprivileged groups.
- The ACF assumes that researchers and agency officials involved in a policy subsystem are not neutral but instead are members of advocacy coalitions.

This conflicts with the image of the Weberian civil servant. I have previously expressed my scepticism of this argument. But it is possible that the neutral role is more applicable to the higher education sector.

- It is possible that many higher education researchers do not stay abreast of theoretical developments in the general public policy literature. To the extent that is true, hopefully this volume will provide a stimulus to be more open to the potential utility of theory.
- It is possible that the ACF is not very useful for understanding anything, and higher education researchers have been quicker to grasp this point than colleagues in other policy sectors.

I would like to close with the fascinating story of Jasmin Beverwijk, a PhD student at the University of Twente. Her dissertation involves an application of the ACF to, of all things, higher education reform in Mozambique.

Ms Beverwijk's research is fascinating to me because it represents an enormous expansion of the external validity of the ACF. Almost all ACF research to date involves OECD countries where there really is a set of stable system parameters, where democratic institutions and the ability to form opposing coalitions are accepted, where most policy subsystems are relatively mature, and where coalitions have been fighting for decades. None of this is true with respect to higher education in Mozambique. Yet, Jasmin is convinced that the ACF is more useful than alternative explanatory frameworks because (1) it avoids the pitfalls of the stages heuristic; and (2) its focus on beliefs, resources and interdependencies provide the building blocks to understand the dynamics of coalition development and policy change (Fenger and Klok 2001).

The greatest satisfaction of a theoretician is to see one's ideas fruitfully applied by someone over whom one has absolutely no control to a situation completely beyond the ideas' original scope of application. If the ACF can be used to understand higher education reform in Mozambique, there is some hope for its application to higher education reforms in OECD countries.

NOTES

[1] For a recent effort to link the ACF to the literature on alternative dispute resolution in order to explain policy de-escalation and consensus, see Sabatier et al. (in press).

[2] This scepticism has been reinforced by a private communication from Daniel Kuebler (University of Zurich) indicating that Swiss bureaucrats involved in drug policy have had no difficulty seeing themselves as members of coalitions.

[3] The exceptions are (a) Magnus Anderson's dissertation on environmental policy in Poland in the 1980s and 1990s; and (b) Chris Elliot's (2001) paper on forest certification in Indonesia. But both of these countries are much more advanced on a 'developing nation' scale than Mozambique.

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