

## **Governance capacity: the capacities needed to govern a complex society**

Reform after reform, the government reshapes the way it works to fit and connect to modern society and to cope with crises, emerging new demands, and wicked issues. Underlying all these reforms lay the quest of balancing flexibility and robustness, specialization and coordination and many other tensions. This balancing act turned out to be challenging. Whereas the Weberian state apparatus was said to be too rigid, New Public Management was accused of increasing fragmentation and coordination problems. As a response, joined-up government, whole of government and holistic governance approaches came to the fore. However, despite all these reforms, the traditional policy capacity to develop top-down policy and the state capacity to enforce implementation, still do not seem to fit the integrated, wicked issues in society and the interdependencies between governments and societal actors.

This raises the question, which capacities, skills, instruments and institutions are required to govern in a complex society? In response to this question, scholars are introducing all kinds of concepts which related to the capacity for governance.

These concepts have at least three things in common. Firstly, they refer to the complexity of society, the interdependencies between actors and the wickedness of problems. Secondly, the concepts go beyond instruments and management tools, and stress the importance of capacities and institutions as well. Thirdly, in the concepts related to governance capacity, scholars emphasize the way capacities are spread among different levels. It is about government-wide reforms of the state apparatus, networks of organizations and individuals (e.g. boundary spanners). So, governance capacity in modern times seems to be about certain capacities and the characteristics of networks, organizations, institutions, relations and people.

However, the concepts differ in their substantial foci. Scholars stress collaboration, networks, agility, adaptivity, loosely coupled systems, innovation et cetera. Besides these different foci, the concepts, and even the capacities to which they refer, incorporate tensions. For example, adaptive capacity and agile governance refer to capacities that contribute to redundancy and stability as well as flexibility (Gupta et al. 2010; Pahl-Wostl, 2009). Collaborative governance emphasizes at the one hand the capacity to deliberate and involve all stakeholders and at the other hand the capacity to come to joint action by a small coalition of key actors and without continuously deliberation (Healey, 1998; Innes & Booher, 2003). Policy capacity is about the personal skills and capabilities, however the institutional and organizational environment is also at stake (Wu et al. 2015). And governance capacity is about coordinating in networks as well as the capacity to ensure democratic values in the governmental hierarchy (Christensen et al. 2016; Van den Dool et al. 2010).

In this panel, we want to unravel this conceptual variety and to expand our knowledge on the different governance capacities and tensions. ***We welcome conceptual as well as empirical studies which unravel the capacities needed for governance in complex society and which give us insight on various and sometimes contradictory elements of governance capacity.***

By addressing the capacities related to the complexity and multi-actor setting of governance, we want to contribute to the research subtheme 'Multi-actor governance in complexity'.

### **Panel organizers**

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