

A Co-creation Challenge: Aligning Research and Policy Processes

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By Katrin Prager

This blog post [originally appeared](#) [2] in the *Integration and Implementation Insights* blog (<http://I2Insights.org>) [3] as "A co-creation challenge: Aligning research and policy processes," and is reposted with the author's permission.

How does the mismatch between policy and research processes and timelines stymie co-creation? I describe an example from a project in Sachsen-Anhalt state in Germany, along with lessons learnt.

The project, initiated by researchers, aimed to use a more participatory approach to developing agri-environmental schemes, in order to improve their effectiveness. Officers from the Agricultural Payments department of the Sachsen-Anhalt Ministry for Agriculture were invited to participate in an action research project that was originally conceived to also involve officers from the Conservation department of the same ministry, farmer representatives and conservation groups.

An initial meeting with the Agricultural Payments officers, to determine the focus of the participatory study, identified a problem with payments for grazing special conservation areas as their key concern. They needed to find a way to maintain payments to shepherds to graze special conservation areas. Shepherds relied on these agri-environmental payments to earn a living from grazing management, but recent changes in regulations no longer allowed payments for grazing in protected areas - where paradoxically the benefit of grazing for conservation outcomes was highest.

However, the research team had no expertise with legal issues and scheme design. What we could offer was a tool to optimise the allocation of budgets. Even though this could not help the government officials with maintaining payments to shepherds, the officials recognised potential benefits of the tool for a different problem, namely in anticipated negotiations with farmers' associations to redistribute

and reduce agri-environmental scheme budgets in the next planning period. This seemed to be their key motivator to cooperate with the researchers and to make internal budget figures available.

The researchers had to compromise by allowing the workshop participants and timeline to be determined by the ministry. The Agricultural Payments department needed the negotiation process with farmer representatives to be undertaken shortly after the project started in order to meet the timelines for scheme revisions set by the European Commission, the federal ministry and the state ministry.

This impacted the research process which aimed to combine facilitated communication with a highly structured mathematical model in a series of workshop meetings. The facilitated communication was intended to support fairness and transparency in the process, and to resolve any potential conflicts. The purpose of the mathematical tool was to structure and visualise the issue (budget allocation), scrutinise different scenarios, and therefore increase the transparency and efficiency of the process.

There was simply no time for the initially planned analysis of the ex ante situation and relevant stakeholders, nor for running more than two joint workshops. This meant that many decisions had already been taken before the first workshop, such as selecting the individual measures to consider in the model and setting some restrictions (eg., upper and lower budget limits per measure). However, scheme objectives and further model restrictions were jointly discussed and agreed at the first workshop, and weightings for the model were developed through a Delphi-style exercise.

Instead of genuine co-creation, the process was shaped by the particularities inherent in bureaucratic organisations especially at the state level. As well as the restrictions already described, the flow and distribution of information from the ministry was poor and impacted on what could be entered into the model; power issues played out in terms of what information ministry staff shared at the workshops and with whom; and the hierarchical, sector-oriented focus of the bureaucracy meant that some relevant stakeholders (especially the Conservation department and conservation groups) were not invited to participate.

Nevertheless, initially the participants were satisfied with the process and this can be attributed to the facilitation generating a level playing field during workshops and the transparency afforded by the mathematical model. However, beyond the workshops, disappointment set in for the non-governmental stakeholders as the usual power structures came into play with ministry officials choosing to disregard the recommendations produced at the workshops.

We concluded that research is not set up to accommodate the requirements of policy making, in at least three ways:

1. First, there may be an inherent difficulty in matching the actual needs of policy makers (in this case the payments to shepherds) with the interests and expertise of researchers,
2. Second, researchers usually cannot deliver evidence in short time frames, often days, and
3. Third, introducing the 'ideal' inclusive communication process may clash with timelines and an unwillingness to cross departmental boundaries.

We learnt that co-creation between researchers and bureaucratic organisations needs supportive gatekeepers and the opportunity for longer term involvement so that trust can be built and opportunities for mutually beneficial co-creation can be seized.

It is extremely useful if researchers are able to recognise power structures and their impact on co-creation, although there will be cases where there is little researchers can do to mitigate this impact. For example, the relevant stakeholders are unlikely to be motivated to contribute to a

co-creation process for which the initiators have already decided the result.

Have you found ways to align research and policy processes, and to create the necessary flexibility in research project funding? I'd love to hear about them.

For more information:

Prager, K. and Nagel, U. J. (2008). Participatory decision making on agri-environmental programmes: A case study from Sachsen-Anhalt (Germany). *Land Use Policy*, 25, 1: 106-115.

Biography: *Katrin Prager is a senior social scientist at the James Hutton Institute in Aberdeen, Scotland. She is involved in inter- and transdisciplinary research on agri-environmental policy making and implementation, collaborative landscape management, community engagement and farmer adoption of conservation practices. Katrin investigates these topics through the lens of institutional analysis, knowledge management, adaptive capacity and organisational behaviour. She is a member of the Co-Creative Capacity Pursuit funded by the US National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center (SESYNC).*

Associated Project:

[Co-Creative Capacity](#) [4]

Audience:

[Researcher](#) [5]

[Policy maker](#) [6]

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[5] <https://www.sesync.umd.edu/audience/researcher>

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