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REIMAGINING POLICY TO ENABLE CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

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To adequately address the increasingly complex global challenges, from climate change to inequality, we recommend allocating resources to capacity building for policy-makers at all levels through targeted values-based programs about working with complexity and through grassroots-level experimentation that involves diverse actors in designing new values-based institutions and cultural practices.

Global challenge

The G20 Italian Presidency has acknowledged that the pandemic “has added its burden onto other systemic problems, from climate change to inequality, which are hampering our ability to fully prosper and express our potential.” Consequently, the 2021 G20 Italian Presidency has prioritized “looking beyond the crisis,

towards ensuring a rapid recovery that addresses people’s needs” and “paving the way to rebuilding differently in the aftermath of the crisis” (Italian G20 Presidency 2021). Achieving these ambitious yet essential goals cannot be done through quick fixes and technical solutions alone. Therefore, there is an urgent need to closely examine and reorganize our fundamental beliefs about our societies and the role of policy in creating our collective future.

Conventional twentieth century ‘evidence-based policy-making’ relies on rational and managerial approaches. This can lead to “an extrapolation tendency, a fluctuating ‘crisis–success’ policy response process, and an intensifying targeting/auditing trend” which produces unintended negative effects (Geyer 2012).

Risks associated with continuing business as usual in policy-making are especially concerning in the light of the recent global pandemic. The COVID-19 response by governments has been virology-based and has not addressed toxicology considerations (Kostoff et al 2020). Integrating virology and toxicology is critical for preventing future health-related shocks and necessitates action outside of the customary domain of public health.

Some examples include: regulatory changes in production and manufacturing practices to eliminate harmful toxins; waste management practices that minimize leaching of toxins from landfills into water tables, agricultural lands, and rivers; and investment in innovations that can replace the use of toxins in industrial and consumer applications. “Emerging findings suggest that exposure to environmental pollutants such as airborne particulate matter, industrial chemicals, and heavy metals may alter the immune system, increasing human susceptibility to infection” (Alper and Sawyer 2019).

Building up resilience before the next pandemic event is therefore correlated to investment in improving immunity by reducing toxicity. The failure of governments to include such important considerations in designing long-term COVID-19 response policies increases the risk of

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devastating societal and financial outcomes of future pandemics. This is a barrier to achieving one of the stated priorities for the G20 Presidency Agenda: “building up resilience to future health-related shocks” (Italian G20 Presidency 2021).

Weaknesses demonstrated in this example are present in policy-making across levels, issues, and geographic locations as and they can become even more damaging when key stakeholders do not have a “consensus on goals, as well as a clear understanding of how these relate to the core values of society and underlying theories of human behaviour.” In this case, the dominant ideology tends to filter out good policy recommendations that do not fit its meta-policy paradigm (Cohn 2004).

This makes disciplinary-based policy-making that is centralized, rational, and expert-driven, create solutions that are reactive, symptom-based, and limited by ideological blind spots. While this approach can improve policy effectiveness, it “simultaneously raises the risk of overall failure by increasing diagnosis, coordination, and compliance costs” (Zahariadis 2012).

Global solution

The inertia of our cultural narratives and institutional structures can constrain worldviews and behaviors. This sustains the exact problems we are trying to address. As Tony Fry argues “while it is impossible to redesign everything that is already designed...it is possible to disrupt the identity of a thing dramatically to transform what it means, and in doing so effectively redirect its status, value, and use” (Fry 2011). Therefore, we suggest that in addition to considering the specific institutional aspects of future-fit policy design described in this chapter, decision-makers work on transforming their personal worldviews to change the meaning of policy that shapes their decisions. We propose a few global solutions below.

Develop actionable policy recommendations by challenging policy-making beliefs and processes

We suggest taking a closer look at fundamental ontological aspects of policy-making as well as their practical implications to articulate actionable recommendations. Such recommendations can help eliminate approaches that fail to adequately address complex challenges and growing existential threats such as climate change and global pandemics. This is in alignment with the G20 call for “paving the way to rebuilding differently in the aftermath of the crisis” (Italian G20 Presidency 2021). To achieve this, we must reconsider some of our fundamental assumptions about policy. As John Ehrenfeld argues, we need to change “the belief structures about social systems from those based on disciplinary models to one that is more consistent with complexity. In healthy and flourishing systems, the smaller, faster levels permit experimentation and invention, while the larger, slower levels serve as collective memories of success” (Ehrenfeld 2019). Redefining the nature and role of policy according to this framework can catalyze the design and implementation of solutions that go beyond quick fixes and have the potential to mobilize and align key actors within the short time frame that we have.

Addressing global existential threats also requires a shared understanding of the challenges we face. While the complexity of modern society calls for experimentation across all sectors, such actors must be allowed the agency to co-generate and co-implement adaptive strategies at their respective levels. However, these actors must also be aware of our global challenges and take responsibility for their role in sustaining or transforming institutional, cultural, psychological, technological, natural, and structural conditions that keep these challenges in place.

Enable participation in policy design and creating holistic policy solutions

Enabling participatory design of local strategies is highly contextual. For such strategies to function cohesively, this would require all participating actors to develop awareness about the larger context in which their groups, organizations, and communities operate.

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Otherwise, there is a risk of ending up with fragmented solutions that will address specific challenges in certain places or domains in ways that would be unlikely to sustainably contribute to the betterment of global systems.

These strategies need to be grounded in understanding that the creative freedom at the national and local levels is limited by our collective need to secure a flourishing future for everyone on our planet. As Tony Fry states, "...radical change is essential and unavoidable and it demands a process of decision and directive action that brings the two imperatives of freedom and futuring together to form an unbreakable unity" (Fry 2011).

The public sector can learn from social entrepreneurship to find practical institutional structures that enable local experimentation while creating conditions for local solutions to fit into a collective strategy. Impact Hub (a global network previously known as "[the Hub network](#)") includes 100+ coworking spaces for social innovators around the globe. The Impact Hub came up with a very effective way to combine a shared purpose with high-context local experimentation. Instead of adopting a standard franchise approach based on centralized ownership, universal standards, and the disciplinary model of rigorous quality control, the network decided to "maintain quality standards without getting standardized" (Bachmann 2014). This included providing local founding teams with access to information and advice from across the network while empowering them to do local research and design their own business model. The condition of this autonomy, however, was that the design must be practical, grounded in reality, and aligned with the shared mission of the global Impact Hub. Over the last few years Impact Hubs have driven social innovation at multiple levels, including local and global, through active participation in policy making in partnership with governments (Amsterdam Impact 2017) and intergovernmental organizations (UNDP 2021).

Design and implement mechanisms that enable generative dialogue and reflection across levels and sectors

System-level reflection and generative multi-stakeholder dialogue are key mechanisms for designing policies that enable the agency of local actors while promoting coherence and shared goals. Just as members of the Impact Hub network designed their model through a dialogue that started with recognizing their shared challenges, policy-makers at all levels can significantly increase the relevance of their policies by initiating and facilitating dialogues across stakeholder groups and locations to allow for system-level reflection.

There are many cases of successful participatory policy-making. Chile is one country that provides notable examples of the integration of multi-stakeholder dialogue at the city, national, and international level: (1) the Regional Government of Metropolitan Region of Santiago convened a participatory process of multi-stakeholder systems to collaboratively design a regional strategy for territorial resilience (Gobierno Regional Metropolitano de Santiago 2017); (2) Chilean Ministry of Cultures, Arts and Heritage engaged grassroots community cultural organizations in the design and implementation of public policies (Ministerio de las Culturas, las Artes y el Patrimonio, Red Cultura y Departamento Ciudadanía Cultura 2019); (3) Chilean Social Development Ministry convened an online participatory process, designed using a systems approach, with indigenous women leaders and public servants from 10 economies of the Asian Pacific to discuss and propose recommendations to public policies to promote indigenous economic development with gender perspective (APEC Economic Committee 2021).

Participatory policy-making requires time to build culture and trust for effective dialogue. But it has been demonstrated to enhance long-term outcomes and to produce networks of engaged stakeholders (Baldwin 2020).

In addition to dialogic processes, system-level reflection can also be enhanced by Big Data and advanced analytics. Especially when considering macro-level factors, such data and analysis can provide valuable context for both policy decisions and stakeholder actions. The use of Big Data can

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develop through two prominent dimensions: the promotion of equitable outcomes, and the democratization of data. With proper analytics, Big Data can help policy-makers identify disadvantaged populations at population-level policies, such as reducing health-inequalities through Big Data, which allows for more comprehensive examinations of social health determinants (Zhang 2017).

Furthermore, the democratization of Big Data through open data platforms can enable stakeholders at individual, communal, or national levels in making better informed decisions. For example, the implementation of Innovation Offices in different U.S. cities, which consolidate and package aggregated data for city halls, has promoted efficient and proactive problem-solving for city halls across disciplines, such as infrastructure improvements, or staff time allocation (Nguyen 2017). The democratization of data further supports efforts made toward achieving SGDs (IEAG 2014).

Besides access, democratization of Big Data and the use of other technologies includes stakeholder participation in technology design and public control over the use of those technologies. The capacity of technology to shape human actions and interactions provides a powerful leverage which calls for stakeholder involvement in the design of the technological solutions that will be shaping creative constraints of those stakeholders. In other words, technology “should enable change, not drive it” (Higgins and Bianzino 2020). Additionally, there is danger in unilateral control over technological solutions as shown by recent cases such as farmers fighting for the right to repair John Deere tractors, by accessing proprietary software, to avoid loss of crops (Mirr 2019). As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated in the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation: “Digital technology does not exist in a vacuum - it has enormous potential for positive change but can also reinforce and magnify existing fault lines and worsen economic and other inequalities” (Guterres 2020).

All these considerations are examples of policy-making changes that facilitate the shift of

how we approach policy. Policy must move away from being an instrument of top-down control that promotes compliance with existing views and ideologies, to an enabler of cultural and institutional transformation driven by stakeholders who recognize the urgency and severity of common challenges. While such a shift requires political courage and involves a great deal of uncertainty, it has the potential to escape the limiting deadlock based on the outdated design of fundamentally unsustainable social systems.

Policy recommendations

We recommend that governments take the following practical steps to enable interdisciplinary, multi-stakeholder solutions based on awareness of our common challenges, trans-contextual learning, grassroots agency, and solidarity:

1. Building the capacity of key institutional decision-makers to understand and work with complexity.
2. Redesigning institutional structures of policy-making to create opportunities and funding streams for grassroot-level experimentation.
3. Implementing transparent mechanisms for stakeholders to design policy decisions (as opposed to simply approving or choosing from solutions designed for them) based on a shared multi-contextual understanding of common challenges. More specific steps in this direction can include:
 - a. Employing proven participatory processes that build coherence across stakeholder groups and inspire stakeholders to take action that complements policy grounded in system-level reflection.
 - b. Training and/or engaging highly skilled process designers and facilitators to convene high-quality, generative conversations, especially for high-stakes issues or conflicts.
 - c. Integrating intersectionalist methods, beyond qualitative studies, by using data to minimize inequalities when designing policies that impact populations.
 - d. Appointing and creating opportunities for data stewards responsible for collecting data to work collaboratively and strategically with policy makers. This would ensure pivotal

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dimensions can be captured based on qualitative reflection that includes affected stakeholders.

e. Encouraging and facilitating the development of more accessible, comprehensive open data platforms to make data analysis accessible for actors and advocates can inform their actions and identify potential discrepancies in technology adoption. This could be created by unfair or otherwise inadequate ownership structures and other forms of institutional power, and would require policy adjustments to promote inclusive, fair, and empowering use of technology.

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