



**HAL**  
open science

## **Policy Devices in Action. A research strategy for analyzing normative resources in a capability perspective**

Lavinia Bifulco, Ota de Leonardis, Carlotta Mozzana, Tommaso Vitale

### ► **To cite this version:**

Lavinia Bifulco, Ota de Leonardis, Carlotta Mozzana, Tommaso Vitale. Policy Devices in Action. A research strategy for analyzing normative resources in a capability perspective. [Research Report] European Union. 2007, pp.12. <hal-03616671>

**HAL Id: hal-03616671**

**<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03616671v1>**

Submitted on 1 Dec 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

# Policy Devices in Action. A research strategy for analyzing normative resources in a capability perspective

University of Milano Bicocca<sup>1</sup>  
Work-package 4, CAPRIGHT project

## ***1. Introduction: Institutions in Action***

The approach we present here has been formulated and tested in several researches on regional and local social policies carried out within the framework of the Research Centre on Sociology of Public Action, Sui Generis, at the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Milano-Bicocca<sup>2</sup>. This approach is based on several theoretical and methodological contributions from those institutional studies which are in different ways oriented to overcoming the dichotomy between normativity and rationality, actors and norms, and it is characterised by its goal of observing “institutions in action”.

The features of our research fields are to be taken into account in building this approach. Policies – where public institutions, norms and regulations act, where visions of the world and *réfèrentiels* take shape, where grammars of justification find expression and where criteria of justice are instituted and applied – display an evident normative density. At the same time, however, they are a privileged field for government actors, political choices, decision-making processes, plans, programmes and strategic actions. Thus, if we want to analyze policies, we need tools that allow us to consider both the normative, and the rational and purposive components of action jointly, and to recognize their reciprocal determinations. A perspective which looks at “institutions in action” is required because the high density of institutions (such as public authorities, laws etc.) which characterizes our research field leaves open the risk of tautology and reification (or substantialisation) of the notion of institution. By looking at "institutions in action" we try precisely to avoid this risk.

---

<sup>1</sup> Members of the team: Lavinia Bifulco, Ota de Leonardis, Carlotta Mozzana, Tommaso Vitale

<sup>2</sup> Our research in the last three years (especially with regard to those that are more pertinent to CAPRIGHT fields and questions) has comprised: a) a comparative study of local health and social policies in Italy aiming at identifying different contractualization devices for both governance and relations between service providers and recipients. We analyzed how different actors in the policy-making field – local public administrations at different levels, organized interests, voluntary and non-profit organizations, and recipients – interact in constructing and implementing devices; b) several researches on local job insertion measures for disabled people at the borderline between social assistance and work policies. In these cases too, we looked at different devices in order to identify which factors shape the results of these measures. In particular, we focused on conversion factors of resources into capability for work\*.

As it is well known, different institutionalist approaches – developed in various disciplines – have converged in thematizing this perspective and have elaborated methodological and conceptual tools to shape it. This perspective is precisely at the centre of the interest in institutional studies and their renovation. The new institutionalism in sociology and organizational studies, for instance, has been developed by first of all overcoming the traditional opposition between “actor” and “system”, between the supremacy of the rational actor typical of methodological individualism and the primacy of norms and institutions, cultural habits and collective representations typical of the Durkheimian tradition. Certainly, these two matrices of thought are still feeding the differences in the way institutions are defined and treated, also because they belong to different disciplines. From the rational choice theory perspective (mainstream in economics), institutions are conceived as normative artefacts constructed by purposive and rational actors to regulate their different interests, while, following the Durkheimian tradition (in anthropology and sociology) institutions are treated as supra-individual normative forces that shape actors’ beliefs and values by providing their vocabularies of motives.

Nevertheless, these two matrices converge under the same institutionalist umbrella and animate discussions on the interdependencies between normativity and rationality. In the last three decades, conceptual and analytical tools for investigating the relation between norms and actions have been elaborated in different ways in the different disciplines. This has been carried out in such a way that they can be combined together in the field and, in particular, in the research on public action and on policies.

On the one hand, the theory of action had been strongly influenced by two perspectives: firstly the developments in the studies on the limits of rationality initiated by Herbert Simon, in particular in the field of the theory of choice and decision (March and Olsen) in organizations and institutions; secondly the studies in economic theory on the relation between economy/economics and ethics (carried out primarily by Albert Hirschman and Amartya Sen) and on the conventional nature of the interaction basis among purposive actors (*l'économie des conventions*). The reference to cultural criteria of action (as “appropriateness”) and to frames, vocabularies or grammars, is nowadays part of the conceptual repertoire of this approach. In this way *action becomes “situated”*, in the sense that the action context is normatively dense, and the actors are engaged in interactions, practices and discourses relevant to the construction, identification and application of rules. Thus, attention to the interlacement between rationality and normativity has been paid by observing social action that addresses (and because it addresses) norms, that elaborates, uses, decides on and interprets them, etc. In this way the (rational) actor loses its “olympic” autonomy but achieves a normative status.

On the other hand, the developments in the Durkheimian tradition redirected in various ways the observation of the normativity of social life at the level of practices, interactions and discourses among actors. Institutions are no longer considered as entities that exert from the outside a coercive, moral or normative force on the actors (neither is it only “socialization” that transfers this force inside people and that can explain their compliance): under the influence of linguistics and anthropology, the actors themselves are recognized to exert this force. As Mary Douglas argues, institutions reveal themselves in thought styles, tastes and also in things. In studying the moral bases of social life, it is essential “to take into account the actors seriously” so as to avoid the risk of reducing them to bearers of roles or habitus. Following on from the contribution of American pragmatic philosophy and the discursive turn, French moral sociology, the main heir of this tradition, has worked on actors’ argumentations and on the respective grammars of justification. The empirical and theoretical research which has studied institutional changes – focusing on innovation processes, de-institutionalization and institution-building, precisely the field of policies – has brought about a redefinition of the institutional dimension of social life in which not the structure, but *the processes and the actors who are engaged in these processes* need to be observed. And, as far as processes are concerned, history enters the picture. We are referring here to the contributions of social history of institutions, especially to the Foucault’s legacy and to the US studies on the development of the American society (Zunz) and democracy (Skocpol and colleagues).

These brief considerations cannot be developed further here but are sufficient to recognize a convergence of the two matrices on a common basis: the intent to overcome the opposition between rationality and normativity by observing how these two drives intersect in social interactions. In particular, it is common in both matrices to focus on two aspects:

- a) *the cognitive and symbolic dimension of norms and institutions*. This dimension is being explored, for instance, in cognitive frames and categorization processes, as in both cultural theory (Douglas, 1987 Douglas and Hull, 1992) and the conventions approach, and in the “grammars” and related vocabularies enacted by actors in their linguistic exchanges, as in both Ostrom’s political theory (Ostrom and Crawford, 1995) and in the theory of justification (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991). In this regard, mention can also be made in the field of policy studies of the so-called “cognitivist approach” (Hall 1993; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, eds., 1993; Muller 2002);
- b) *the forms of co-ordination and the organizational processes*. This focal point is central both in the conventions approach and in the organizational studies that concentrate on cultural artefacts and sense-making processes (Sims, Gioia, 1986; Pondy et al. 1983; Czarniawska

1997; Weick, 1995). In this respect, we can also mention March's focus on the ambiguity of both actors' intentions and norms in institutionalised decision-making processes.

Hence these two focal points redefine both action and norms. They suggest a shifting of attention from actors (who have the power to establish norms) and from normative structures (that constrain them) to the processes in which both actors and structures take shape.

Therefore, when looking at public action (such as a policy arena, an inter-organizational network, a local system of governance), we direct our attention on the one hand to *the inertial side of institutions*, which finds expression in various ways: the "taken-for-granted" in the standardised practices and cognitive routines of the actors engaged in a policy field; the well known learned incompetence of public bureaucracy; the mechanism of the self-fulfilling prophecy operating in the service provision systems. And on the other hand we examine the institutionalising (or de-institutionalising) side of social action, looking at policy reframing practices and at rational goal-oriented actors engaged in processes of *institutional change and building*. As to the latter, we consider how multiple and different actors interact, coordinate and organize themselves in order to establish more or less formal rules (legal norms, regulations, policy devices, standards), fight on and if any share definitions of problems, solutions and classifications, and discuss and choose between different justice criteria.

This perspective leads us to observe the *relations of power* in social policies – in their design and implementation – and the mode and rank of their changes both in the cognitive field (the elaboration of categories and of judgment criteria, that is the informational basis) and in the organizational field (the different forms of interaction and coordination, exclusion and inclusion, to be found in governance). It is in these fields that we propose to analyse *the position of the recipients* and their power in the policy making and implementation processes, and to search for which factors may prevent or encourage the construction and the expression of their capabilities for voice. In this respect, we consider when and how the different aspects of the inertial side of institutions confirm conditions of capabilities deprivation through mechanisms of objectivation and, vice versa, when and how recipients become actors of institutional change/ institution-building processes.

## ***2. Conceptual tools and methodologies for studying normative resources: analytical focus on devices in action***

This approach, as formulated and tested in our researches, is the basis for identifying the key issues and the methodologies that we wish to use and develop in the CAPRIGHT project. Our aim is to

pinpoint which factors facilitate or prevent the conversion of resources into capabilities, with a particular focus on capabilities for voice among fragile subjects. Our approach suggests that they are to be discovered in the area of the interactions between actors on norms being instituted, enacted, changed, etc. in the regional and local implementation of social policies.

We propose to focus attention on the analytical field of *policy devices*, by developing one of the strategies tested using the above-mentioned approach. The policy devices are those normative tools which settle the action field of a policy, define the characteristics of beneficiaries and benefits, the rules for access, competencies, forms of coordination between actors engaged in the field in various ways, etc. Following the literature (see Le Galès and Lascoumes, 2004; but also important are the Foucault's concept of power technologies and the related literature), these are “governing instruments” which, in a regime of governance, “make the actors do”, by instituting incentives, constraints and resources for action. On the one hand, as instruments they are the correlate of choices, strategies and strategic actors; on the other, they establish normative constraints, especially legal and technical ones. We intend to analyze contractual forms of coordination (especially those regulating the provider-recipient relationship), entitlements and their certifications (for example, those regulating the access to programmes for job insertion), accreditation rules and related incentives (regulating social markets), and technical standards (i.e. standards of space).

In order to analyse these devices, we adopt the two focuses previously indicated: a) *their cognitive components*, and b) *their organizational effects*.

**On the cognitive components of policy devices.** This analytical focus can help to “open up” a normative device, to deconstruct it with the aim of recognizing *the policy-framing* process through which a problem is defined and matched with competencies. To do so, we will concentrate our attention on the actors that have played a role in this definition (expert systems, professional and scientific bodies, political authorities, social claims), the related *pertinent vocabularies* that actors use in implementing it and the interpretations of the situation that confront one another in this implementing process, thereby sometimes reframing policies.

With the aim of recognizing these cognitive components of policy devices, the research will be focused on the *informational basis that they fix as relevant*. This is because we wish to answer the following questions: which definitions of the situation, classifications of the problems, data and indicators are relevant? who can participate in the definition of classifications, indicators and relevant information? what is the recipients' position? do they participate in defining, interpreting and changing these informational bases and, if so, how? Recipients' voice on the informational basis is a relevant aspect of the capabilities for voice that we want to investigate.

In the sphere of local programmes for job insertion of the disabled, for instance, it is possible to analyze and compare the informational basis contained in different devices that regulate the access to programmes of vocational training: as it is based on the biomedical certification of disability, the targeted placement tool selects relevant items of information and their sources in a different way from that used in the stipend (“*borsa-lavoro*”) in a social cooperative for job insertion.

Analysis of the informational basis will provide us with some data on the conditions that allow involved subjects to be recognized as relevant sources of information on which a choice or an action can be taken.

**On the organizational effects of policy devices.** We start from this analytical field to investigate how policy devices work in practice, and what are their organizational effects, which is our second analytical focus. In this second stage, we propose to observe the types of coordination among actors that the different policy devices produce through regulations and incentives, and to investigate what the recipients’ position is within these types of coordination. To analyze these organizational effects, we have formulated an analytical grid that we propose to apply, test and improve or correct.<sup>3</sup> It consists in a typology of organizational variables operating at four levels, from the operative level to that of policy governance, and highlights two alternatives, which we derive from some classic contributions.

The first level concerns the position of recipients as against providers. Here the most relevant devices are those aiming to promote recipients’ individualisation and activation by conferring on them a contractual status. In this case, we intend to develop the direction marked out by the analysis of two different monetary transfer measures and their effects in organizing or disorganizing welfare recipients: vouchers (or similar schemes) and “individualised projects”. These organizational effects can be represented by Robert Castel’s alternative of “*collections of individuals*” or “*collectives*” (Castel, 2003). The first refers to the atomization effects from giving people the freedom to change the service provider through the “exit” option, in a social market. The second concerns the support obtained by belonging to collectives – i.e. by being involved in societal networks - which is needed for expressing the right to “voice” on the service to be provided. By means of this alternative, we can also analyze if users’ organizational formulas (self-help, project groups, users’ associations, social enterprises) are encouraged or not. And we could investigate whether these formulas recreate or fail to recreate conditions of belonging and recognition through which the people involved –

---

<sup>3</sup> This grid has been tested also in order to explore the organizational effects with regard to the transformations of citizenship and political participation, in particular focusing on if and how they contribute to the organization – or disorganization – of democracy and to the diffusion of democratic habits in both civil society and government institutions. See De Leonardis (2006).

especially those more in need of help - can participate in and influence choices on their own life, and have their voice heard in the policy field.

The second level refers to the organisational forms of voluntary or non-profit welfare agencies operating in the policy field, mainly the so-called 'third sector'. In this case, the relevant devices are those that establish forms of service provision delegacy, standards for accreditation and evaluation procedures. The organizational effects at this level can be analyzed using the alternative suggested by Theda Skocpol (2003) between "*membership*" and "*management*". The first refers to organizations built on the participation of those involved, who contribute both to the organization choices and activities; the second to those business-like agencies characterized by a managerial – or corporate – structure. The hypothesis that these two organizational forms produce different recipient' positions in the relationship with these organizations and different ranks of participation and voice, is well grounded (and consistent with the Skocpol's research findings).

The third level is the shape of the organizational networks, alliances, and generally inter-organizational co-ordinations involved in the governance of a policy. In this case, the most relevant devices are those that regulate co-ordination between agencies, and the alternative is between "*aggregation*" and "*integration*" proposed by March and Olsen (1989, 1995). The main question here is whether the organizational actors are induced to collaborate (and conflict) with one another in order to control and share out resources or to formulate projects jointly and share in aims and results. What holds the organization together? Means or ends? Are the networks coordinated through (market) competition or through "cooperative conflict"? Are the organizations encouraged (or compelled) to be homogeneous – for example by being incorporated in a single 'brand-name' (this is often the case of consortia) – or to play up its different identities and to discuss aims, reasons, choices and criteria for choices so that the inter-organizational field resembles a political arena? In our research we have found that these different inter-organizational forms give rise to different models of governance, the one grounded more on plurality and the other on power concentration.

At the fourth level, different organizational effects are measured in vertical co-ordinations and the organization of governance. In this regard, we can refer to the alternative between "*bargaining*" and "*arguing*" that Jon Elster (1993; 1998) established by analysing two different constitutional processes. This alternative draws our attention to how the governance of social policies is organized and prompts us to look at the policy devices regulating a) the degree and forms of representation of interests and claims (especially whether it is based on lobbying or on constituencies), b) the degree of openness and inclusiveness of the partnerships and c) if the decision-making procedures are exposed to public scrutiny and discussion.

To sum up:

<b>ORGANIZING OR DISORGANIZING WELFARE RECIPIENTS</b>	Collections of individuals	Collectives
<b>ORGANISATIONAL FORMS OF VOLUNTARY OR NON-PROFIT WELFARE AGENCIES</b>	Management	Membership
<b>INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL CO-ORDINATIONS IN THE POLICY ARENA</b>	Aggregation	Integration
<b>VERTICAL CO-ORDINATIONS AND THE ORGANIZATION OF GOVERNANCE</b>	Bargaining	Arguing

We aim at developing our research especially at *the first two levels of the grid*, where the impact on the policy recipients' position is more direct and visible. These levels provide an advantageous point from which *to observe and analyze the factors that hinder or facilitate the conversion of resources into capabilities, in particular those capabilities that are manifested in the expression and recognition of recipients' voice*. With regard to this aim, our analysis of the informational basis of policy devices will be made to converge on these levels by investigating which conditions are required for recipients' voice to be a source of relevant information in determining resources and measures and assessing their results.

In choosing this field of research, it is our intention to give precedence to the issues centered on *individual capabilities*. Nevertheless if we look at the grid as a whole, it can be seen that in every column the four levels are linked to one another and are in some way interdependent, thereby sketching a *prima facie* coherent system<sup>4</sup>. If we look at the right-hand column, we notice that the conditions permitting the development of recipients' capability for voice also involve the other two levels referring to the institutional architecture of inter-organizational networks and of modes of governance, through which their voice can go upright and be generalized. Thus, these levels take into consideration those *collective capabilities linked with a regional or territorial dimension*. In this way, we propose to use the entire grid to contribute to the formulation of questions and hypotheses on the relation between individual capabilities at the micro level and collective capabilities at the macro level.

---

<sup>4</sup> The empirical world of organizations, practices and institutional arrangements in the fields of social policy is obviously far more complex and mixed. However, by comparing different Regional welfare regimes in our research, we also found trends towards an adjustment, or concentration, of these organizational variables in the same direction. The clearest cases of such polarization appear to be those of Lombardy and Friuli regions.

In conclusion, our approach privileges *the analysis of normative resources* – as they are expressed in policy devices – in order to investigate *how and to what extent these resources translate into “real freedoms” to choose and act on one’s own life*. It particularly looks consistent with the research into the conditions for the development of *capabilities for voice, both at the cognitive and at the organizational level*. In fact, we consider the capabilities for voice as those freedoms that can be developed when and to the extent that people are recognized as holders of rights regarding the interventions that concern them: not only the right of access to benefits (“social rights”), but also the (political) right to debate and decide on them, thus participating in the process of building and changing norms. We suggest that the analysis based on the two analytical focuses and on their interlacements be developed for the purpose of *comparing different devices*. We will conduct further investigations and some new studies in the same policy fields that were the object of our previous researches<sup>5</sup>. But we will also pay special attention to the conditions for undertaking comparisons with other research results which, within the CAPRIGHT sphere, show the action of other devices in different regional and local contexts of policy.

---

<sup>5</sup> See note 1.

## References

- Boltanski, L., Thévenot, L. (1991), *De la justification*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Castel, R. (2003), *L'insécurité sociale. Qu'est-ce qu'être protégé?*, Paris: Seuil.
- Crawford, S. E. S., Ostrom E., (1995), A Grammar of Institutions, *American Political Science Review* 89: 582-600.
- Czarniawska, B. (1997), *Narrating the Organization. Dramas of Institutional Identity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Douglas, M. (1987), *How Institutions Think*, London: Routledge.
- Douglas, M., Hull, D., eds. (1992), *How Classification Works. Nelson Goodman among the Social Sciences*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press
- Elster, J. (1991), *Arguing and Bargaining in two Constituent Assemblies, The Storr Lectures*, New Haven: Yale Law School.
- Elster, J. (ed.) (1998), *Deliberative Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Hall P.A., (1993) Policy Paradigms, Social Learning and the State, *Comparative Politics*, 25 (3), 275-296.
- March, J.G. (1988), *Decisions and Organizations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- March, J. e Olsen, J. (1989). *Rediscovering Institutions. The Organizational Basis of Politics*. The Free Press: New York.
- March, J.G., Olsen J. P. (1995), *Democratic Governance*, New York: The Free Press.
- Muller P. (2002), *Les politiques publiques*, Paris: PUF.
- Ostrom, E (1990), *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ostrom E., Crawford S. E. S. (2005), Classifying Rules, in E. Ostrom, *Understanding Institutional Diversity*. Princeton University Press.
- Pondy, L., Frost P., Morgan G., Dandridg T.C. (eds.) (1983), *Organizational Symbolism*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Powell, W.W., DiMaggio P.J (eds.) (1991), *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Sabatier P.A., Jenkins-Smith H.C. (eds) (1993), *Policy Change and Learning. An Advocacy Coalition Approach*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- Sims, H., Gioia D., (1986), *The Thinking Organization*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Skocpol, T. (2003), *Diminished Democracy. From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Weick, K. (1995) *Sensemaking in Organizations*, London: Sage.

**\*Research Centre on Sociology of Public Action, Sui Generis: References**

( <http://www.laboratorio-suigeneris.net>)

Bifulco, L., de Leonardis, O. (2005), *Sulle tracce dell'azione pubblica*, in L. Bifulco (ed.), *Le politiche sociali. Temi e prospettive emergenti*, Roma: Carocci.

Bifulco, L., Bricocoli M. (2005), *New Styles in Administrative Change: Projects, Third Parties and Handcuffed Organizations*”, paper presented the international colloquium of EGOS (European Group of Organization Studies), *Unlocking Organization*, Berlino, June 30- July 2.

Bifulco, L., Borghi V., de Leonardis O., Vitale T., (eds) (2006) *Che cosa è pubblico?*, Special Issue, *La Rivista delle Politiche Sociali*, 2.

Bifulco L. (2006), *Governance, the ‘Public’ and Public Administration: Notes from Social Policies*, paper presented at the international colloquium of EGOS (European Group of Organization Studies), *The Organizing Society*, University of Bergen, July 6-8.

Bifulco, L., Vitale, T. (2006), *Contracting for welfare services in Italy*, *Journal of Social Policy*, 35, 3: 495-513.

Bifulco, L., Centemeri, L. (forthcoming), *Governance and Participation in Local Welfare. The Case of the Italian Piani di Zona (Area Plans)*, *Social Policy and Administration*.

Borghi V., Vitale T., (a cura di), 2006, *Le convenzioni del lavoro, il lavoro delle convenzioni*, Numero monografico di *Sociologia del lavoro*, 104.

de Leonardis, O. (2002), *Social Markets, Social Quality and the Quality of Social Institutions*, in W. Beck, L. Van Der Maesen, F. Thomese and A. Walker (eds), *Social Quality. A Vision for Europe.*, The Hague: Kluwer Law.

de Leonardis, O. (2006), *Social Quality, Social Capital and Health*, *European Journal of Social Quality*, 2.

De Leonardis, O. (2006), *Local Welfare and Democracy*, *La Rivista delle Politiche Pociali*, n. 1 (also in [www.e-urbs.net](http://www.e-urbs.net))

Monteleone R. (ed.) (2007), *La contrattualizzazione nelle politiche sociali: forme ed effetti*, Roma: Officina.