

Public administration readiness for managing in the network: managing the advisory groups. The case of Ministry of Education and Science of Lithuania

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Introduction

Ministries in pursuing to fulfil public administration functions to model the policy and stirring the policy making process, employ advisory groups alongside the hierarchy organisational structure ministries are organised by. Those groups are gathered temporary with specific purpose, which is usually determined by the stage of policy elaboration. The composition of advisor groups conventionally consists of the politicians, public administrators and external experts, whereas external expert could serve both stakeholder and researcher (consultant) roles. If ministerial organisational structure is represented by vertical hierarchy where the politician as elected representative occupies the top of the structure, the advisory groups could be perceived as a horizontal structure supporting the vertical hierarchy in some way and members of the groups could be perceived as policy actors. The temporary nature of advisory groups and dynamic change of composition let us consider those groups as a part of wider external network. This network could act either as supportive or confronting formation to the policy proposed by public administration. Therefore the structure of network of external stakeholders together with scientific policy advisers and other public interest representatives is a source of knowledge about effectiveness of decision making made by public administration. If the added value of the advisory groups or committees to policy making are under permanent attention of scholars, there is still lack of the empirical data about substantial advisory group practice and even rarely analyse it by mean of policy network.

The goal of research is to analyse the ministerial practice of dealing with advisory groups recognising those groups as network arrangements of external policy actors. The mixing of methods is tested and proposed as comprehensive approach tackling the diverse attitudes of policy actors. The analysis is based on the empirical studies of the policy actors' network structure. Empirical quantitative data are supported by qualitative data with the purpose to contextualise the quantity data, making finding comprehensive for policy practitioners.

1. Participation policy and policy networks

Participation policy: approaches to decision making. Participatory governance as an approach to policy decision making is the concept that democratic governance is pursuing (Plotke, 1997). Democratic countries have long history using different arrangements to enhance the

participation: referendums, social polls, public meetings, comments and suggestions for decision projects, public debates, citizen's boards and juries etc. (Koontz, 1999; Edelenbos and Klijn, 2005; Fishkin, 2009). It is customary, that large choices of participatory instruments with various application possibilities have different impact on the policy outputs. As consequence, different participation forms require specific managerial instruments to stir the policy process in the manner that participation become meaningful. Evaluation of a possible impact on policies is a challenging task that has been addressed by Michels (2011). He did meta-analysis on the scientific findings about different participation instruments and traced out that some of participation forms are more legally oriented and have direct impact on new legislation as for referendums case, while other participation forms produce other added value to policy making. For instance, public meetings, decision making /advisory groups or committees, if they are managed proportionally to the means of arrangement, create the supportive environment for complex decision and propose wide range of knowledge, structuring from knowledge generation to consensual knowledge creation (Mikulskiene, 2013). Positive expectation towards participation groups cover not only knowledge generation issues but also engage citizens' participation in political governance, acknowledge group interests, create the process of citizens' political learning and etc. (Halpin, 2006), However the management of participation volume is accompanied by both fundamental challenges and subjective judgments. Different groups intentionally or not may suffer discrimination (cultural minorities, youth could be less represented in the participation groups). Meantime strong and well expressed interest groups together with experts could take a dominant role in such participation arrangement if no procedural rules are stated in advance.

Managing in the policy networks. Networks as a concept for policy governance emerged with the purpose to describe the multidimensional nature of policy making. Networks for policy could be characterized by informal, non-hierarchical relationships that connect various individuals from both public and private sector organisations (O'Toole, 1997; O'Toole et al., 2004). Policy network members „share common interests with regard to a policy and who exchange resources to pursue these shared interests acknowledging that co-operation is the best way to achieve common goals” (Börzel, 1997). Policy network construct fits well while wide public participation is recognised as value of democratic governance. On the one hand concept of policy network produces the rich body of knowledge about policy actors and their mutual binding inside policy processes: policy learning, belief change, risk sharing, collective actions (Koppenjan, et al., 2004; Ramiro et al., 2010). On the other hand, networks propose a certain mode of actions.

Approaches to policy network analysis.

Together with theoretical policy network concept elaboration, the policy network analysis based on empirical data was conceptualised and powerful techniques such as social network analysis has been developed (Scott et al., 2011). The analysis was primarily build on description of network structure making emphasis that structure as it is have direct impact on policy making outputs. Policy network analysis later is supported by more sophisticated statistical methods such as regression and multivariate methods with the purpose to test hypotheses. Different theories or

frameworks based on network statistical analysis could be listed: institutional analysis and development, advocacy coalition framework, punctuated equilibrium, ecology of policy games, the diffusion of policy innovations (Lubell et al., 2012). Empirical studies face challenges to collect data and map informal networks as it exist in the real world. Different competing technics are developed (such as roster method or name generator method) acknowledging that both methods have restrictions (Henry et al., 2012).

2. Methodology and research sample

Mixed method approach. Discussions on what types of method whether it is qualitative or quantitative is more reliable and acceptable for policy support, bring us to the discussions what type of evidence our policy actors are pursuing. Obviously, respecting own attitudes, different policy actors usually express different acceptability and perception of evidence. Those evidences, that are common to public administrators, acting in hierarchical organisation structure are fully dismissed from the point of view of others non hierarchical policy users as consumers acting in the role of representatives (for instance people from local community or stakeholders representing cultural sector). Those different attitudes, background and experience could be taken in to consideration while policy evidence is collected and generated. Nevertheless acknowledging that rigorous data and pure facts are not less important than emotional aspects and subjective interpretation facts of the decision problem, the mixed methods for policy supporting evidence are needed and could propose triangulation media.

Mixed method methodology (combining social network analysis and semi-structural interviews) could produce more reliable knowledge while the task is to tackle the phenomena of social relationships that lead to new policy development. The mixed methods approach could become more powerful instrument producing comprehensive outputs with the following added value to policy analysis:

- Quantitative analysis produce solid data available to use it for further policy decision inputs with particular solutions
- Qualitative analysis generate subjective information for interpretation
- Mixing of methods give social value of data.

The research framework is presented in Figure 1 and demonstrates the methods integrity. At the Phase 1, both methods qualitative and quantitative proceeded simultaneously in concurrent manner. At the Phase 2, the data of social network analysis is used with explanatory purpose to support or deny the hypothesis about public administration ability to work in network-like environment. The Phase 3 is used for embedding of outputs and give en extensive explanation of phenomena.

Sampling. Officially nominated advisory groups that were employed at the Ministry of Education and Science of Lithuania during two periods of 2007 and 2010 were analysed by means of social network analysis. Members of advisory groups are analysed as network nodes. Every single participatory group is established by issue a decree, so the content of decrees of

Ministry were taken as data for social network analysis. To contextualise the outputs of social network analysis, semi-structural interviews were employed.

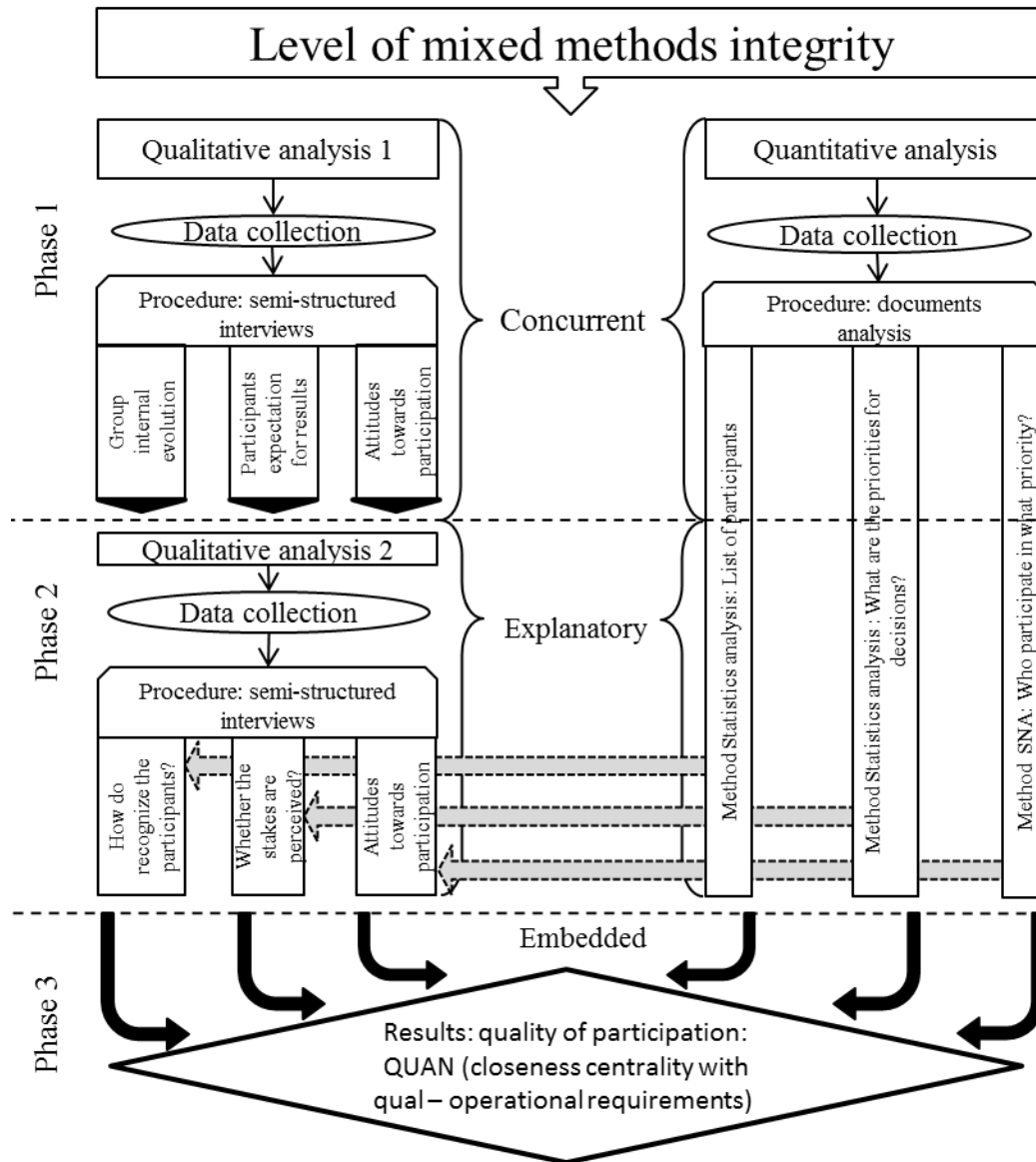


Figure 1. Research framework for mix methodology.

The overall research data set covers 162 temporary institutional arrangements and 1127 participation facts were detected. According to social network analysis terminology, 1743 relationships that represent facts of individual participation in the total during the tree analysed years. The two mode network (relations between actors and advisory group) analysis let us make distinguish the main role of external policy actors in the process of policy making and find out what type of actors are more desirable during discussions the certain policy topic.

13 semi-structural interviews with participants of advisory groups were conducted. The pull of interviewees consists of two vice-ministers, seven public administrators occupying higher administration level, four non-ministerial participants (professors at Universities). The following questions have been analyzed: who did you invite to the policy creation cycle; what methods did you employ to recognize those who might be interested, and whether were those policy actors valuable to fostering policy creation.

3. Finding

Semi-structural interviews. Interview exercise produced rich body of knowledge about the nature of participation and the role of actors of policy networks, pointing out both positive (“we invited policy actors”, “they participated actively”, “we make substantial input”, “we have positive experianc about participation in ministerial groups”) and negative attitude (“there is no sense for their (external actors) participation”, “there is lack of room for participation by means of time and competences of unprepared actors”, “our input was rejected in the later stage of policy outline”) of interviewees. This qualitative analysis discloses the widespread practice of opening policy arena for wider participation and exhibits the week participation management aspects that could be improved. However, qualitative data can be so controversial and may not be easily generalized if it used solely. Sometimes it could sound suspicious from the side of those, who are criticized by these data.

The complementary data of different nature is needed and could be used to disprove the doubt that it is not handy for any part of policy actors.

Social network analysis. The quantitative research results have revealed that the organisational structure is reflected in the network structure. Figure 2 represents 2 mode network of 2010 for visualisation purpose.

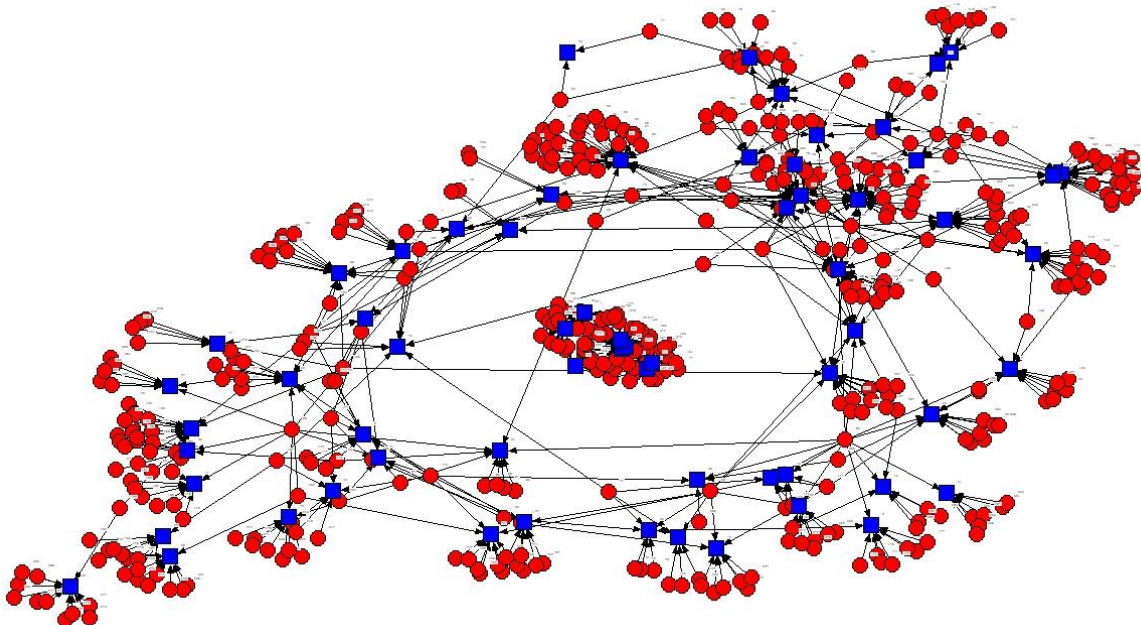


Figure 2. 2 mode network of advisory groups for 2010.

The two aspects of policy actors' network management are analysed: the network members' recognition by authorities and the role of the network members in the advisory group. All advisory group members were analysed assigning them seven criteria according to their official affiliation. Politicians and public managers from Ministry of Education and Science together with other public administrators were assigned to the group of regulators. Advisory bodies and financial bodies were distinguished from regulators since those organisations have different and very specific official mission during policy making. Schools, universities and other organisations that provide different type of education and research services grouped as Service providers. Associations delegate their representatives, so they were analysed separately. Figure 3 demonstrates distribution of policy network members according their affiliations. We can see that public administrators together with politicians are the main participants in participatory arrangements in Ministry. The second largest group is service providers, while associations participate occasionally.

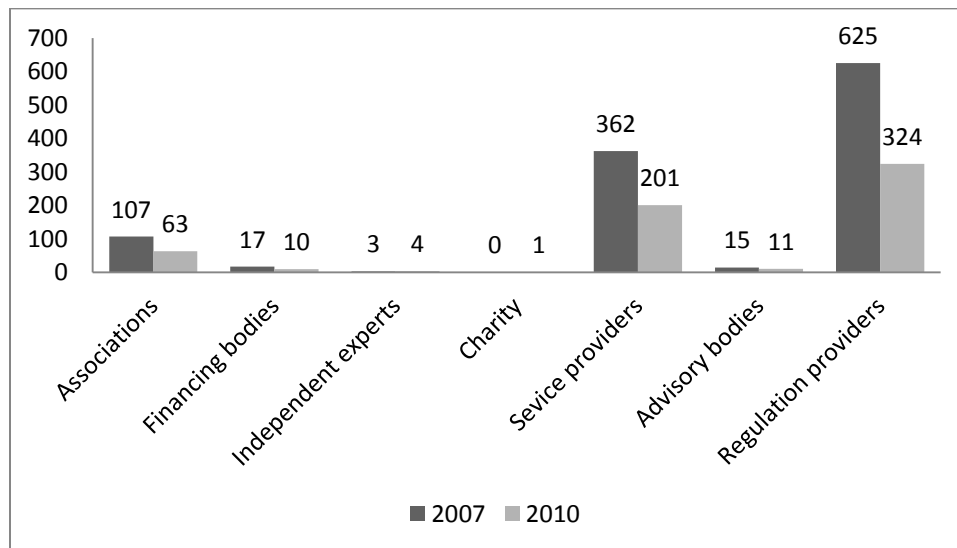


Figure 3. Network actors' distribution according their main role in the advisory groups.

The qualitative research explains this particular policy network members' composition. The specific composition and the ratio between ministerial members and others external group participants fully depends on those who initiate those groups. Mainly public managers with politicians take a decision to set a participatory group and select those who become a group member.

Empirical studies of the evolution of network characteristics in the groups exhibit a low level of interest representation and high willingness to acquire expertise instead. Undeniably, the network

dynamics has unfolded that political participation of policy administrators and stakeholders was broader in 2010 while political responsibility was wider shared with public administrators and stakeholders in 2007. The tendencies when actors appointed according to their political confidence acquire prominent and dominating positions in stake representation give reasonable grounds for concerns about a decline in the development of participatory policy.

4. Discussion

The construct “participation policy” implicate that those policy actors with different attitudes, preferences for decision and occupation that will be affected by new policy have right to participate in the policy creation cycles and make their input in to policy modelling. Such implication encourages us to measure the volume of participation and empirical data let us trace the network like structure within Ministry. The analysed advisory groups could be recognised as a network which is managed by Ministry. However the composition of network, dynamics changes of participants and network structure when the leading role is concentrated within political representatives, brings us to the new discussions about participation quality. One should acknowledge that participation quality strongly depends on the representation ability of the representatives and on the democratization level of representative organization they belong to. Further analysis on participation quality elaborating special measuring techniques using mixed method approach is needed.

By this research we demonstrate that mixed methods approach could become powerful instrument for policy making support, producing comprehensive outputs available with the different intentions: produce solid data for further policy decision inputs with particular solutions and generate subjective information for interpretation and give social value of data.

The social network analysis, elaborated for the relations measurement, can be applied for policy making media and for others organizations that are close to policy making. New quantitative data about participation and ties between those who draft the policies can reveal the additional missing part of knowledge that reduces the uncertainty of pure qualitative data. As consequence the content of relations between policy actors becomes a source of information about the particular status of participation.

5. Conclusions

We can draw a conclusion with certainty that the practice of advisory group formation are mostly based on the purpose to search for knowledge with the strategic significance. Those groups are less frequently gathered with simple administration purpose. The composition of the advisory groups fully corresponds to the topic of decision and on the level of knowledge available. However the stakeholder role is dangerously uncertain. The source of this uncertainty could be based on political sympathies and blurred understanding of the added value of advisory group practice. The overall finding is that the hierarchically based structured public administration

addresses insufficient attention to the added value of networked collective knowledge of stakeholders. Policy makers express the resistance to innovation and new approaches as a hierarchical organization is avoiding dealing with risk.

The methodology of participation quality measurement based on mixed methods is proposed and recommendations to use in cascade manner are analysed. The way methods for research were mixed, could add value to unfold the gap between rhetoric and the practice and find the target point for improvement. Applying the mixed methods for participatory policy network analysis we can create the interface of comprehensiveness, while hitting the side of the participation sometimes hidden by positive human evaluation.

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