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Title: *Implementing Complex Policy Initiatives: Layering, Drift, Conversion and Policy Design as Alternative Outcomes of System Reform Efforts*

Topic: *“C”: Institutions and Change: Conditions of Political Reform for System Innovations*

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Abstract/Outline:

Proposals to alter large-scale social systems such as socio-technical systems in order to promote goals such as sustainability through government actions are highly uncertain policy projects. What is being proposed is the replacement of specific elements of existing policy ‘mixes’ or ‘regimes’ - the goals, objectives and calibrations of existing policy tools and goals - by others, in the expectation of avoiding counterproductive or sub-optimal policy outcomes. While laudable, such efforts are fraught with risks; including the possibility of the creation of new sub-optimal instrument mixes or of failed reform efforts with resulting poor outcomes at the macro, meso or micro-level.

This paper examines the literature on similar policy regime reform efforts in the past, notably in the area of health and welfare state social policy reforms, but also those dealing with the environment and natural resource use, in order to develop a model and typology of large-scale complex regime change processes and outcomes (Hacker, 2004a and 2004b; Evers and Wintersberger 1990; Evers 2005; Briassoulis 2005). Specifically, the paper argues that complex policy mixes emerge through four processes: ‘drift’, ‘conversion’, ‘layering’ and ‘design’.ⁱ The expected outcome of these different processes are linked to the manner in which policy goals and means are (or are not) linked in a consistent and coherent fashion (see Figure 1) (May 2005a and 2005b).

The existing evidence shows that existing policy regimes or mixes have typically been developed haphazardly through processes of policy layering, or repeated bouts of policy conversion or policy drift, in which new tools and objectives have been piled on top of older ones, creating a palimpsest-like mixture of inconsistent and incoherent policy elements.ⁱⁱ Recognizing the drawbacks of layering, conversion and drift, policy makers

and critics have increasingly turning to the promotion of complex policy mixes that have been designed, rather than incrementally developed (Meijers 2004; Briassoulis 2005; Meijers and Stead 2004). The explicit goal of these new designs is optimization and the avoidance of contradictory or conflicting mixes of policy tools (Gunningham et al 1998, Gunningham and Sinclair 1999).

The identification and study of these design efforts is at an early stage of development in the policy sciences but research projects are underway in several countries involving strategic interventions that range from the integration of sustainability or innovation objectives into policy on a broad scale (Sadler 2005), to more focused integrative efforts such as health assessments, disaster planning, safety cultures, integrated coastal zone management, rural development, wildlife management and more (Power and McCarty 2002; Foster, Haward and Coffen-Smout 2005; Wescott 2002; Keysar 2005; Lee 2006; Johannesen 2006). A common theme in this literature is the pervasive presence of institutional obstacles to making a new start and the difficulty of preventing integrative strategies from simply adding new layers of complexity, duplication and ambiguity to already sub-optimal mixes of goals and instruments.

This paper elaborates upon the elements of this typology and applies these lessons to the concrete modalities and practical difficulties encountered in efforts to alter the nature of complex socio-technical regimes towards sustainability.

Endnotes:

ⁱ • *Layering* is a process whereby new goals and instruments are simply added to an existing regime without abandoning previous ones, typically leading to both incoherence amongst the goals and inconsistency with respect to instruments used. Many sustainability strategies have suffered this fate; for example, efforts at the integration of various resource management regimes that have failed when powerful interests are able to keep favourable goals, instruments and settings, such as unsustainable fishing or timber cutting quotas that support an industry, and limit the impact of new policy initiatives (Howlett and Rayner 1995; Rayner et al 2001).

• *Drift* occurs when the goals of the policy change without changing the instruments used to implement them, which then can become inconsistent with the new goals and most likely ineffective in achieving them (Tornvlied and Akkerman 2004). This is a common situation in welfare state mixes whereby, for example, goal shifts from family to individual support (and vice versa) have occurred without necessarily altering the instruments in place to implement the earlier policy goal (Hacker, 2004c).

• *Conversion* involves changes in instrument mixes while holding goals constant. If the goals are inconsistent, then changes in policy tools may reduce levels of implementation conflicts or enhance them, but are unlikely to succeed in matching means and ends of policy. Such situations have characterized some major health policy reform efforts, for example (Falkenmark 2004; Hacker 2004a).

•*Design* occurs when there is a conscious effort made to create or fundamentally re-structure policies so that they are consistent and coherent in terms of their goals and means orientations (Eliadis, Hill and Howlett 2004; Gunningham and Sinclair 1999). Lack of a sustained and focused effort on the part of designers, however, can easily lead to changes in only goals or instruments and hence accomplish changes through drift or conversion, resulting in sub-optimal or disappointing results.

ⁱⁱ These types of policy mixes often serve as the empirical basis for models of policy dynamics based on notions of path dependence – that is, policy as the outcome of a series of more or less random conditions that combine over time to produce a trajectory of events (in this case, policy-making) which although, very often sub-optimal, is exceptionally difficult to change (Pierson 2000; Greener 2002; Howlett and Rayner 2006).

Figures:

Figure 1. Typology of Complex Policy Mixes According to Relationship of Policy Goals and Instruments

		Regime Instruments	
		<i>Stable (Consistent)</i>	<i>Unstable (Inconsistent)</i>
Regime Goals	<i>Stable (Coherent)</i>	Design	Conversion
	<i>Unstable (Incoherent)</i>	Drift	Layering

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