P05 / Implementing Policy Innovation in Government: Challenges for Policy Workers, Labs, and Leaders

Topic : POLICY FORMULATION, ADMINISTRATION AND POLICYMAKERS

Chair : Kathy Brock (Queen's University)

Second Chair : Andrea Migone (Simon Fraser University)

Third Chair : Michael Howlett (Simon Fraser University)

Fourth Chair : Adam Wellstead (Michigan Technological University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Much attention in governments in recent decades has been devoted to policy innovation in the public sector in recent years. This includes modernizing governments by developing effective and forward-thinking public service renewal strategies, developing an innovative, agile and resilient workforce, and adopting new digital, data and communications technology and techniques (Small and Jansen 2020; Clarke 2019; Longo 2022; Clarke and Dubois 2020). While some progress has been made to varying degrees in different countries, the overall progress has been relatively modest when measured by OECD surveys such as the OECD Digital Government Index, internal reports to governments such as the Report of the Clerk of the Privy Council or Budget officer reports, and academic studies (Roy 2017; Lindquist 2022). In some cases, attempts to innovate have led to major fiascos in implementation or serious problems with system replacement and integration (Cooper and Turgeon). The results have been mixed at best with a workforce that is divided or ambivalent or disaffected (particularly the new professionals (Migone, Brock and Howlett, 2023)) by the discrepancy between the promises and results.

This panel will comprise papers that examine the challenges posed by implementing policy innovation in government on three levels united by the following research questions:

1. What are the most prevalent challenges to implementing policy innovation in governments in recent years, using policy labs, digitalization, big data techniques and artificial intelligence?

2. What policy implementations tools are the most effective to date and why?

3. Is the policy innovation implementation agenda as defined by government achieving the agile, effective workforce required in the current policy world to deal with new and transformative policy issues and crises (ex. COVID-19), or is it over-promising and under-delivering with the result of a disillusioned new professional cohort that is quiet quitting, disillusioned or resigned?

While this panel cannot provide full or complete answers to these questions, it can begin to explore some of the embedded difficulties in transforming the policy environment to ensure that effective policy techniques are being implemented in governments that equip the current and future generations of policy workers to deal with more complex and intransient policy problems. The analyses will make a direct contribution to the literature on policy innovation and implementation and policy worker recruitment and retention (Bason 2010; Bessant 2005; Brown and Toze 2017; Cristofoli et al. 2022; Ertas 2015; Howlett et al. 2018; Mergel 2016; Ng et al. 2016; Cox and Rigby 2013; Wu et al. 2017).

FORMAT: Onsite

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Much attention in governments in recent decades has been devoted to policy innovation in the public sector in recent years. This includes modernizing governments by developing effective and forward-thinking public service renewal strategies, developing an innovative, agile and resilient workforce, and adopting new digital, data and communications technology and techniques (Small and Jansen 2020; Clarke 2019; Longo 2022; Clarke and Dubois 2020). While some progress has been made to varying degrees in different countries, the overall progress has been relatively modest when measured by OECD surveys such as the OECD Digital Government Index, internal reports to governments such as the Report of the Clerk of the Privy Council or Budget officer reports, and academic studies (Roy 2017; Lindquist 2022). In some cases, attempts to innovate have led to major fiascos in implementation or serious problems with system replacement and integration (Cooper and Turgeon). The results have been mixed at best with a workforce that is divided or ambivalent or disaffected (particularly the new professionals (Migone, Brock and Howlett, 2022) by the discrepancy between the promises and results.

This panel calls for papers that examine the challenges posed by implementing policy innovation in government on three levels united by the following research questions:

1. What are the most prevalent challenges to implementing policy innovation in governments in recent years, using policy labs, digitalization, big data techniques and artificial intelligence?

2. What policy implementations tools are the most effective to date and why?

3. Is the policy innovation implementation agenda as defined by government achieving the agile, effective workforce required in the current policy world to deal with new and transformative policy issues and crises (ex. COVID-19), or is it over-promising and under-delivering with the result of a disillusioned new professional cohort that is quiet quitting, disillusioned or resigned?

The panel is especially interested in case studies, survey research and empirical analysis of recent policy

innovation implementation initiatives that have succeeded or faced challenges and the associated experiences of new professionals and policy leaders.

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Session 1

Tuesday, June 27th 13:30 to 15:30 (KHW360)

Exploring Facets and Process Dynamics Of Public Sector Innovation: a Comparative Study of Canada and UK

Emre Cinar (University of Portsmouth)

Abstract

This study explores the OECD's new facet-based approach to classifying public sector innovation (PSI) and analyses 77 cases from Canada and the UK submitted to OECD`s Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI). It reveals that whilst adaptive innovations are prioritised in Canada, enhancement-oriented innovations are the most frequently reported one in the UK. Collaborations and interactions are narrated commonly in every element of the innovation process from the content to the partnerships, from the obstacles to the conditions for success. Our comparative analysis points out contextual differences to discuss the role of national context in PSI.

1.INTRODUCTION

Public sector innovation (PSI) is regarded as a significant tool to produce more public value from government spending (Borins, 2014). In recent years, the OECD has been trying to facilitate PSI through conferences, workshops, and publications. Its Observatory of PSI (OPSI) has gathered information on hundreds of innovations from which it has built a comprehensive database. OPSI recently proposed to classify PSI in terms of four facets: Anticipatory, Mission-oriented, Adaptive and Enhancement- oriented. Neither the database nor the new facets have been studied from an academic perspective. Thus, the purpose of this research is to explore the new classification as well as the elements of the innovation process- collaboration, obstacles, conditions for success, outcomes and transferability by studying four OPSI documents on innovation facets and 77 cases submitted to OPSI database from Canada (n=34) and the UK (n=43) both of which have been hubs for public sector reforms and PSI over many years. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) software, NVivo, was utilised for the content analysis. Our work is informed by the calls of Borins (2014) and Cinar et al. (2022b) to study PSI databases comparatively in different contexts to identify the trends and the role of national context in PSI. By doing this, we provide comparative insights and contributions to several areas of the PSI innovation literature: innovation types (Chen et al., 2020; Cinar et al., 2022b), collaborative public sector innovation (Borins, 2014, Torfing, 2019, Clausen et al., 2020; Cinar et al., 2022a), innovation obstacles (Borins, 2014; Cinar et al., 2021; Fred and Mukhtar-Landgren, 2022),innovation outcomes (De Vries et al.,2016) and transferability (Hartley, 2016)

Recruiting for Change: New Recruits and Innovation in the Canadian Public Sector

Andrea Migone (Simon Fraser University)

Kathy Brock (Queen's University)

Michael Howlett (Simon Fraser University)

Our paper will examine the challenges faced by Canadian public administrations in the areas of innovation and in particular in the development of a space that includes a viable mix of resilience and robustness. Using findings from two studies of New Professionals across Provincial, Territorial and Federal public

administrations undertaken by the Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC) in 2015-2018 as our basis for analysis, we argue that, when public sector organizations need to innovate or to introduce wide-ranging and complex shifts like digitalization which operate not solely at the level of tools and technology, but also at the level of approaches and mentality, they face human resource challenges. Adapting Denyer's (2017) arguments we construct a model of change dynamics for public service organizations that is built around the three dimensions of resilience, adaptability and agility and a modified version of Denyer's two continuums: defensive-progressive and consistency-flexibility. In particular we argue that the areas of static resilience, where only micro changes occur, and that of dynamic resilience, which is characterized by agility and much broader changes are implemented, are clearly demarcated. However, the intermediate spaces of framework and operational adaptability are murkier and responses from new professionals indicate that recruitment may play a critical role in enabling the move from static to dynamic resilience.

(Virtual) Results-based culture & governmental efficiency: The moderating role of IFMIS in public sector institutions

Joseph Chirwa (Northern Arizona University)

Drawing from positive administration and positive accounting-reform theories, this study examines the moderating role of Integrated Financial Management Information Systems (IFMIS) in public sector institutions in least-developed countries (LDCs), navigating the causal link between outcome-based culture and governmental efficiency in local government institutions in Malawi. This research aims to identify, based on elected government officials and chief accountants, the factors that influenced governmental efficiency. The research model and hypothesis were tested using R studio with the survey samples from 487 accountants and 28 district commissioners working in local government institutions in Malawi. The results show that an outcome-based culture positively impacts governmental efficiency despite the economic lapse and covid-19 pandemic. The Integrated financial management system played a moderating role in the relationship between outcome-based culture and governmental efficiency. The results of this study were statistically significant. The study posits a valuable addition to the financial management and New Public Management (NPM) scholarship on applying outcome-based culture in enhancing financial accountability and governmental efficiency.

What defines experimental culture in governments? A study of innovation units in Asia

Sreeja Nair (National University of Singapore)

Policy experimentation can be undertaken by governments for a variety of reasons. This includes making necessary adjustments to ongoing policies as these are stress tested over time to maintaining a steady flow of policy proposals ahead of time in anticipation of changes in the policy context. Politics often however hinders governments from enthusiastic and routine experimentation. In the recent decade a rise of experimental units has been observed within governments tied to an expressed need for evidence-based policy design, integrating behavioural policy insights in policy decisions and fostering innovation. Identifying the features of experimentation culture in governments is challenging and forms the focus of this paper. This is partly due to the politics of experimentation. Additionally, governments may not want to be seen as unsure and unclear on what they are doing and avoid calling their decisions 'experimental'.

This paper will present preliminary results from a study of features of an experimental government theoretically anchored in policy innovation literature. The paper generates a model with level of innovation as the outcome of study and features of an experimental government as independent variables (causal conditions for innovation). Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is conducted to identify configurations of conditions that lead to variation in levels of innovation [considered as a proxy for experimentation] studying innovation units within selected Asian economies.

What is successful policy experimentation?

Kate Mattocks (Dalhousie University)

This paper discusses the concept of success in relation to policy experimentation, a type of policy innovation. It is based on empirical work undertaken in a case study of an ambitious program of policy experimentation in Canadian federal cultural, heritage, and sport policy.

Governments are increasingly turning to policy innovation in a bid to solve complex problems. However, despite a growing literature on policy experimentation, few studies define or explore what constitutes a successful experiment or program of experimentation. This is important given the potential of experiments for policy learning and change. It is also vital so that experiments and experimentation programs can be evaluated and lessons learned across jurisdictions by academics and practitioners alike.

Empirically, the paper is based on document analysis and semi-structured interviews with 30 key policy actors in the Department of Canadian Heritage and beyond. It develops four key ‘success criteria’ (basic elements of an experiment, process, evidence, and outcomes), arguing that experiments must be evaluated not only on their outcomes but on the processes used to create them. Particular focus is given to the procedural challenges of implementation, including legitimacy, transparency, validity, and reflexivity.

With this focus on implementation, and lessons learned from those challenges, the paper speaks most closely to questions 1 and 2 of the panel’s research questions.

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Session 2

Tuesday, June 27th 15:50 to 17:50 (KHW360)

Discussants

Andrea Migone (Simon Fraser University)

Michael Howlett (Simon Fraser University)

The goals and means of policy innovation labs: A global review through the lens of policy design

Nora Ottenhof (Toronto Metropolitan University)

Sarah Giest (Leiden University)

Ishani Mukherjee (Singapore Management University)

Anat Gofen (Hebrew University)

Policy innovation labs (PILs) are new policy actors and are part of a larger global “labification” movement (Williamson 2015). They are spaces for the novel development and testing of policy solutions (Price, 2015, Fuller & Lochard, 2016). Nevertheless labs have already multiplied into a variety of forms – including the level of government (central, sub-national, and local), sectoral (food, transportation, environment) to cross-sectoral labs (social innovation, data labs) (Kim et al, McGann et al. 2018). While there has been some analysis of the tools and techniques that PILs apply, such as design thinking and behavioral insight methods, it is unclear what their role is in the policy design process. From a sample of 169 PILs worldwide, we employ Cashore and Howlett (2007) policy classification framework characterized by policy focus and policy means. The policy focus included the broad macro-level goals (Does the PIL influence the general ideas that govern policymaking); program objectives (Does the PIL impact the formal program-level objectives?), and micro-level goals, namely the operational tool settings (Does the PIL affect the specific on-the-ground settings of a policy). The policy means category included the instrumentation logic (Does the PIL work to influence general implementation preferences or policy styles, the program mechanisms (Does the PIL influence the choice of specific instruments used during programs) and at the micro level, the tool calibrations (Does the PIL affect the specific ways in which a tool is used?). We also identified labs by their broad focus (public sector reform, program delivery, and policy design) as well as their oversight and governance. The analysis shows that the labs are split evenly across being part of government and external ones and they mostly focus on policy design processes and public sector reform. In terms of policy goals, PILs address program objectives and goals, whereas for policy means, program mechanisms are a primary focus.

University-based Policy Innovation Labs: A Policy Actor, a Pedagogical Tool, or Both? A case study of the Queen's School of Public Studies Policy Lab (QSPS-PIL)

Adam Wellstead (Michigan Technological University)

Kathy Brock (Queen's University)

Over the past decade, policy innovation labs (PIL) have become increasingly important policy actors, and

subject to research enquiry (Wellstead et al. 2021; McGann et al. 2018; Schurmann & Tonurist 2017; Gofen an& Golen 2021; Carstenson & Bason 2012). Many are found within government agencies or receive government funding. Others are more independent and are often externally supported by philanthropic organizations and foundations (eg, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Sloan Foundation). Some external PILs are located within universities (e.g., University of California Policy Lab, University of Oregon Policy Lab, the University of Toronto Munk School Policy Innovation Lab, and the McGill University Max Bell School Policy Lab). Often university PILs engage in lab-like activities (co-design, evaluation, and program delivery) and, also use these experiences as student training opportunities. While much of the literature views these PILs as innovative policy actors, questions have arisen regarding their effectiveness (Van Acker & Bouckaert 2018; Lewis 2021; Guay 2018; Brock 2021; Ault et al. 2019; Coblence et al. 2017; Ferrarezi et al. 2021; Komatsu et al. 2021; Williamson 2015).

This paper begins by framing the argument with an overview of the university PIL landscape, including their forms, operations and intended purposes. The paper then poses the following research questions:

1. Are short-term, purpose-specific university-based PILs effective actors in addressing complex policy problems?

2. Are such PILS effective pedagogical tools for training aspiring public servants to think innovatively when facing complex policy problems?

The paper uses a case study approach to provide a preliminary answer to these questions. Specifically, the paper studies the case of a week-long Queen's School of Public Studies MPA Policy Lab (QSPS-PIL) conducted in April 2022. The QSPS-PIL was designed with two primary objectives. The first aim was to acquaint students with tools employed by PILs such as design thinking or behavioural insights (Einfield and Bloomkamp 2021; Olejniczak et al 2020). The second goal was to make a substantive contribution to addressing the disruptive, often lawbreaking, partying associated with the annual Queen’s Homecoming Week that poses challenges to the hospitals and police each year. Despite multiple and collaborative efforts, municipal, university, health and legal authorities have not been able to find an effective policy solution – making this an ideal policy problem for a PIL.

This case study can provide some useful preliminary answers to these questions as well as identifying key strengths and weaknesses of PILS in practice and thus confirm or challenge propositions in the existing literature on the value and limitations of university-based PILs as policy actors and as heuristic learning devices.

What’s Going on In There?: The Work of Canadian Government Policy Labs

Nora Ottenhof (Toronto Metropolitan University)

Bryan Evans (Toronto Metropolitan University)

This paper explores the policy lab landscape in Canada and specifically the ‘work’ of Canadian government policy labs. Based primarily on desk research (analyzing web site content) of 35 Canadian government policy labs, the activities and methods employed by Canadian government policy labs are identified and compared to policy labs globally. In addition nine labs are presented as case studies in the work of labs. Specifically the policy/program field area of focus (e.g. housing, environment) and methodologies employed are explored. Nine labs, three each within municipal, provincial and federal governments, are studies as cases to provide a brief analysis of recent work conducted. This exploration into Canadian policy labs has led us to some
notable insights. First, there is a strong spatial concentration of policy labs within our nation’s capital region. This makes intuitive sense as the majority of labs in our sample were under the jurisdiction of the Canadian federal government. We further note that policy labs have only recently gained significant traction within the Canadian policy making landscape, with over half of sampled labs having been formed between the years 2016 and 2018. We see a great deal of variance in primary area(s) of focus, noting 28 unique focus areas. The most frequently noted area of policy focus was governance with 18% of labs having done work within the field. A similar diversity in terms of the methodologies labs choose to employ is observed. Our sample finds 37 distinct methodologies employed by Canadian policy labs, the most common of which
was experimentation with 23% of labs reporting application of this approach.

Stuck in the Middle: How Policy Innovation Labs reconcile between user centric approach and global sustainability expectations?

Esti Hoss Golan (Reichman University)

Anat Gofen (Hebrew University)

Adam Wellstead (Michigan Technological University)

To address both persistent and emerging social and environmental problems, governments around the world have been seeking innovative ways to generate policy solutions in collaboration with citizens (Lewis, 2022). One prominent trend during recent decades is the proliferation of Policy Innovation Labs (PILs), in which the search for policy solutions is embedded within laboratory-like structures (Gofen & Golan, 2020; Wellstead et al., 2021). PILs employ a variety of approaches, methods, and policy design practices that specifically engage stakeholders. By doing so, they adopt a 'user at the center' approach (Brock, 2021). There are a growing number of case studies chronicling how PILs apply this approach, by using, for example co-design, generating ideas, test prototypes (Whicher et al.2019; Williamson, 2015), and ethnography or action research (McGann et al.2018; Wellstead, 2020).

In contrast to the above literature that is focused on what PILs do in creating innovative policy solutions that put users and the local context at the center, global influences on PILs activities is understudied. One power indicator is the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) that are a cross jurisdictional "blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future" (United Nations 2023). The 17 SDGs represent broad policy areas, in which nearly all PILs are found.

Specifically, this study examines whether, to what extent and in what way PILs respond to SDGs during policy formulation processes.

Analysis will draw on a database developed by the authors, which coded the content of the websites of 200 European PILs and key informant interviews senior PIL employees. Findings will allow a better understanding regarding the role that PILs undertake, and specifically whether self-perceived as an accelerator of changes at the local level in the face of local challenges, or as a player in the international arena, where policy innovation is embedded in the broad global sphere.

A threefold contribution to the policy lab scholarship is expected. First, uncovering to what extent user centric approach of the PILs is shaped by broad, international influences. Second, to what extent PILs play a role in the efforts to meet SDG goals. Lastly, from a practical perspective, findings will provide insights for challenges inherent within attempts to balance and harmonize between efforts to meet the needs of a unique contextual environment on one hand, and efforts to respond to global challenges on the other.

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P05 / Implementing Policy Innovation in Government: Challenges for Policy Workers, Labs, and Leaders

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Session 3

Wednesday, June 28th 08:00 to 10:00 (KHW360)

Discussants

Michael Howlett (Simon Fraser University)

Kathy Brock (Queen's University)

Digital technologies as an incentive for future decentralization

Inke Torfs (Universiteit Gent)

The importance of a strong local government is recognized worldwide for its benefits in terms of innovation in policy, proximity to citizens, transparency, and ability to solve complex policy issues. For these reasons, most European countries have been focusing on decentralization whereby authority, power and/or resources were transferred to the local level. The problem, however, is that the effects of decentralization are not necessarily positive or negative. It often leads to diverse and even conflicting effects. This diversity is mostly explained by the difference in type (e.g. administrative, political, or fiscal) and degree (e.g. devolution, delegation, or devolution) of decentralization. According to some, it might also be due to the context-dependency of the phenomenon. Anyway, existing literature mainly focuses on explaining the differences and less on ways to converge the effects. Therefore, our research searches for factors that have the potential to counter the adverse effects of decentralization such as limited administrative power, loss of coordination, and insufficient financial resources. More specifically, we investigate the potential of digital technologies. Past experiences show they already have been successful in supporting institutional reforms. The combination of information, computing, communication, and connectivity technologies allows local governments to increase their efficiency and effectiveness, operational capacities, and budgetary performance.

Thus, our research seeks to better understand “which digital incentives can overcome the deadlock of decentralization?”. We answer this research question by performing a multiple case study in nine Flemish local governments. We choose to study (within) Belgium’s northern region because its government has a multilevel architecture with clear focus on decentralization which also undertook several initiatives to implement digital technologies. First, we conduct focus group discussions to discover what local governments experience as the most adverse effects of decentralization. Second, we interview local department heads to address the potential possibilities of digital technologies to counter those adverse effects. Consequently, we explore the effects of decentralization and build a conceptual framework (for policymakers) to overcome the adverse effects by using digital technologies.

Sample supporting literature

Gehman, J., Glaser, V., Eisenhardt, K., Gioia, D., Langley, A., & Corley, K. (2018). Finding Theory–Method Fit: A Comparison of Three Qualitative Approaches to Theory Building. *Journal of Management Inquiry, 27* (3), 284–300.

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Programme for Improvement of the Business Environment in the Municipality of Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Tamiris Resende (Prefeitura Municipal de Belo Horizonte)

Authors:

Juliana Mara Winther Roos, MSc., Analyst at Subsecretaria de Modernização da Gestão (SUMOG), Secretaria Municipal de Planejamento, Orçamento e Gestão (SMPOG), Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

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Jean Mattos Duarte, MSc., President at Empresa de Informática e Informação do Município de Belo Horizonte, Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

Renata Resende Coelho, MSc., Head at Subsecretaria de Modernização da Gestão (SUMOG), Secretaria Municipal de Planejamento, Orçamento e Gestão (SMPOG), Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

Tamiris Cristhina Resende, Ph.D., Advisor at Subsecretaria de Modernização da Gestão (SUMOG), Secretaria Municipal de Planejamento, Orçamento e Gestão (SMPOG), Belo Horizonte, Brazil

In 2017, the Municipality of Belo Horizonte implemented the Programme for Improvement of the Business Environment bringing together projects in areas of operation in order to provide conditions for improving the quality of services provided to entrepreneurs in the municipality. The Program was born within the scope of the Modernization of Management Department (SUMOG), in Planning, Budget and Management Secretariat (SMPOG), the central coordination body in the Municipal Administration, giving a corporate character to this management practice involving specialist public servants in government management, institutional articulation and incorporation of technologies in the municipality. The implemented methodology seeks to reflect and promote public governance, adopting a set of leadership, strategy and control mechanisms to evaluate, direct and monitor management, in order to conduct the policy of improving the business environment that in fact favors the entrepreneurs of the County. Leadership, strategy and control mechanisms were adopted that made the projects viable and promoted their results. Listening rounds were held with entrepreneurs (in person and online, during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic) that contributed to the alignment of the program's priorities and strategies. The approximation with other institutions, such as Endeavor, also promoted the exchange of information that is disclosed by them in their reports that cover similar issues in other municipal realities.

Keywords: Public Governance; Entrepreneurship; Governmental Planning;Modernization.

Implementation of an e-file system in the German justiciary. Results of a nationwide survey of district courts

Nicolai Dose (University of Duisburg-Essen)

Implementation of an e-file system in the German justiciary
Results of a nationwide survey of district courts

Nicolai Dose[1] in collaboration with Leon A. Lieblang[2]

For Panel T05P05 / Implementing Policy Innovation in Government: Challenges for Policy Workers, Labs, and Leaders

Chair: Kathy Brock

Germany has considerable problems getting on the digital highway. Compared to all 27 countries of the European Union, Germany only ranks below average. While the problems are manifold there are still very few systematic empirical studies beyond case studies that shed light on the causes of German’s relative failure to digitise. These causes can be divided into shortcomings in the governance structure on the one hand and in implementation and acceptance problems on the other. We are interested in this second set of causes and ask about the implementation problems that arise during the introduction of an e-file system. We attempt to answer this question using the example of the introduction of an e-file system in German district

courts. Against the background of the technology acceptance model, we are particularly interested in problems that affect the perceived usefulness and the perceived ease of use of the innovation ‘e-file system’. In order to find out more about the perceptions of judges and service staff at district courts, we set up a nationwide online-survey, which was systematically prepared by intensive interviews with eight judges and intensive discussions with an IT-service provider. The 666 completed questionnaires represent a response rate of approximately 20%. This is not too bad considering that judges are a difficult target group for surveys.

The findings show that the perceived usefulness of the e-file systems is substantially impaired by numerous technical problems, some problems inherent in digitisation and, in particular, one problem caused by the federal state structure, i.e. three, in part incompatible e-file systems being implemented in the different Länder. While the technical problems can in principle be solved and should be solved soon, the digitisation-specific problems can at best be mitigated. Having three different e-file systems in the 16 German *Länder* can only be changed at high financial and political costs. However, greater efforts should be made to make them compatible with each other if the acceptance of the e-file system is to be increased.

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Pushing innovation in cities? Lessons from Urban Labs across the world

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This paper examines urban policy labs (UPLs) as a new innovative practice aiming to improve collective problem-solving in key policy issues.

Labs are a relatively new actor in the policy arena and are part of a larger global “labification” movement (Williamson 2015). They are spaces for the novel development, testing, and in some cases the delivery of policy solutions. (Price, 2015, Fuller & Lochard, 2016). There is a wide variety of policy labs including their focus (central, sub-national to local government) and their sectoral engagement (food, transportation labs) also including cross-sectoral labs (social innovation, data labs) (McGann et al 2018).

Urban policy labs (UPLs) are a particularly important because cities play a growing role as policy actors and arenas of technological transformation, social inclusion, and sustainable development (Glaeser, 2001; Brenner and Schmid 2015). In the urban context, policy labs promise engagement of various, often marginalized stakeholders, user-friendly utilization of technology, an adaptation of cutting-edge innovations to urban problems, and real-time evaluation of creative solutions.

Although promising, policy lab literature is dominated by self-reported cases and misses a critical comparative perspective. Labs also lack coherent theoretical foundations and conceptual frameworks to critically study their collaborative operations (Wellstead et al 2021).

From this gap, we are motivated to ask how UPLs operate and how they are nested within the multi-level governance structures, the policy issues they focus on, how they support SDGs, the scope of their work (services, projects, policies, regulations), and the types of policy actors are involved in their activities. With an understanding of these key descriptive background factors, we can address the more salient issue of urban labs’ function in government decision-making. Central to our analysis is how urban policy labs contribute to agenda setting, characterizing problems, creating and choosing solutions, and testing solutions (Baumgartner & Jones, 2005; Hallsworth et al 2018; Howlett & Cashore, 2020).

The paper addresses these questions by critically reviewing the population of 124 UPLS worldwide. They have been identified based on extensive desk research and advanced internet tracking of labs web pages.

By examining UPLs through the lenses of applied problem-solving in public policies and SDGS goals, we hope to advance our understanding of innovative ways of productively engaging various actors in collective problem-solving in the context of increasingly important urban policies. Our research also offers avenues for civil servants and public policy practitioners to use policy labs to foster innovation and change in public administration.

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