# P98 / (Inter)dependent Implementers: Capacity, Incentives, and the Management of Mutual Dependence

**Topic :** Implementation/Street-Level Bureaucracy

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## GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Implementers rarely act alone. Municipalities deliver services that work only if neighbouring jurisdictions deliver theirs, agencies apply rules that take effect only after other agencies act, and states meet international obligations that pay off only if other states meet theirs. Governments also adopt policies in packages, where officials can apply one instrument only once colleagues have applied a linked one. In each setting, implementers hold only part of what they need to deliver. Implementers depend on one another in different forms. An agency that needs another to act first, without being needed in return, depends unilaterally. Neighbouring municipalities depend on each other bilaterally, and states under a common obligation depend on one another multilaterally. We use the term interdependence for these mutual forms.

Implementation scholars have addressed these phenomena from different angles. Some locate the causes of success inside the implementing unit, in its capacity, preferences, discretion and domestic politics, and scholars of differentiated implementation have refined that view (Princen et al. 2024; Thomann and Sager 2017). Others study the relation between implementers and a centre, and explain performance through monitoring, sanctions, guidance and support (Kelemen and Pavone 2023). Where researchers address horizontal relations, they mostly treat them as a design problem that centres settle in advance (Cabane and Lodge 2024), through centralisation, coordination bodies or experimentalist review cycles (Zeitlin and Rangoni 2026). Few researchers treat dependence among implementers as a cause of outcomes, and fewer ask what central actors do once that dependence surfaces during delivery.

We see two reasons why this matters. First, researchers who compare jurisdictions usually treat them as independent observations, so where one implementer’s performance rests on another’s, we risk crediting capacity or domestic politics with what follows from the structure of the obligations. Second, designers and central administrators work on the same assumption, so they supply capacity where the problem is unwillingness and apply pressure where the problem is sequence. Scholars who take dependence seriously can also connect implementation research to three largely separate literatures, on compliance in international relations, on coordination and policy mixes, and on weakest-link collective action problems.

We therefore ask how implementing actors behave when their performance depends on what others deliver, whether they behave differently across forms of dependence, and how central actors manage it.

Participants in this panel can explore four propositions. First, implementers experience dependence through at least two channels, a lack of capacity to reach an outcome alone and a loss of willingness despite capacity as others hold back, and central actors need different instruments for each. Implementers should face the second channel mainly under interdependence, where each can condition its effort on what others deliver. Second, central actors answer the first channel by aligning timing, through deadlines, sequences and recurring cycles, and the second by prescribing, funding or enforcing, with uneven success. Third, implementers who cannot withhold performance openly condition their effort quietly through administrative practice. Fourth, implementers feel dependence most where deadlines bind, where they must share burdens or resources, and where the centre enforces weakly or slowly.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

We invite papers that treat dependence between implementers as an outcome to explain or as a cause of other outcomes, in its unilateral form or in the bilateral and multilateral forms we call interdependence. We welcome empirical contributions from any policy field and hope to bring several fields together. Officials in climate and energy planning, public health emergencies, migration and asylum, water and river basin management, digital and data regulation, disaster response, infrastructure delivery, social services and public procurement all face the problem in a recognisable form. We equally welcome work on any level of government, including federations, decentralised states, regional organisations, international regimes and

city networks.

We welcome a wide range of methods, including qualitative case studies and process tracing, comparative designs, document and content analysis, interviews and surveys with officials, formal models, and quantitative work on implementation performance. We especially welcome authors who treat jurisdictions as linked observations in their research designs, since we ask what researchers miss when they treat jurisdictions as independent. We also welcome conceptual papers, particularly those that clarify how dependence differs from interdependence, how the unilateral, bilateral and multilateral forms differ in their effects, or how these ideas relate to coordination, policy mixes and instrument interaction, joint production, and weakest-link collective action.

Authors who speak directly to the panel will do at least one of the following. They will identify which tasks in a given setting tie one implementer’s performance to another’s, and show how implementers respond. They will compare how implementers behave under unilateral dependence and under interdependence. They will examine what central actors do about either, and with what effect. They will explain variation, whether between tasks inside one jurisdiction or between jurisdictions facing the same task. Or they will specify the conditions under which interdependence helps implementation rather than hindering it. We also encourage authors who challenge these propositions to take part.