P140 / Policy mix design for wicked problems

Topic : Policy Design, Formulation & Instruments

Chair : Sabrina Kirschke (University of Copenhagen)

Second Chair : Hannah Kosow (Universität Stuttgart)

Third Chair : Thomas Bolognesi (Grenoble Ecole de Management)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Wicked problems characterized by conflicts, complexity and uncertainty abound across policy fields, from climate change and natural resources to public health and artificial intelligence (Head 2022). As no single instrument can address these problems, policy design scholars have turned to policy mixes and to criteria for their effectiveness and legitimacy (Capano & Howlett, 2020). Often, both scholars and practitioners call for policy mixes that are coherent across sectors and levels, robust under uncertainty, and adaptable as problems and knowledge change (e.g., Kirschke and Kosow 2022).

These criteria are usually treated as goals to be maximised. For coherence, for example, recent debates have focused on optimizing coherence across policy fields to avoid trade-offs and to generate synergies between sectors (Batkhuyag, 2026). Yet striving for coherence involves trade-offs, e.g., regarding the costs and effort of coordination between different interests and goals. Pursued too far, coherence may lock in a single problem framing and reduce the diversity that makes a mix effective and acceptable. The relationship between design criteria and policy outcomes is thus unlikely to be linear (Bolognesi and Fischer 2025). Yet, how far each criterion should be pursued for which type of problem, and how governance enables suitable mixes, remains poorly understood.

This panel proposes to move from maximization to calibration. It conceives of good policy mix design as finding a ‘corridor’ within a triangle of coherence, robustness, and adaptability to be both effective and acceptable. This corridor likely differs between types of wicked problems, for instance depending on whether they are driven mainly by complexity, uncertainty or conflict.

The panel is guided by three research questions:

1. Which policy mixes, and which balance of coherence, robustness and adaptability, suit which types of wicked problems?

2. To what degree must these criteria be fulfilled, i.e., where do corridors lie, and how do the criteria reinforce or trade off against each other and against further criteria such as effectiveness and acceptability?

3. Which governance conditions enable such mixes? More specifically, how do science-policy-society interactions help actors to assess and reach suitable corridors?

By addressing these questions, the panel advances debates on policy design and good governance for wicked problems. It connects the policy mix literature with research on the governance of wicked problems, and offers decision-makers orientation on how much coherence, robustness and adaptability is ‘enough’.

References

Batkhuyag, M. (2026). Policy Coherence in Climate Governance: A Systematic Review of Empirical Research. Environmental Policy and Governance.

Bolognesi, Thomas, and Manuel Fischer. 2025. Policy Design and Governance Effectiveness: The Role of Non-Linearities in Urban Water Management Governance: e70064.

Capano, G., & Howlett, M. (2020). The knowns and unknowns of policy instrument analysis: Policy tools and the current research agenda on policy mixes. Sage Open, 10(1), 2158244019900568.

Kirschke, S., & Kosow, H. (2022). Designing policy mixes for emerging wicked problems. The case of pharmaceutical residues in freshwaters. Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning, 24(5), 486-497.

Head, B. W. (2022). Wicked problems in public policy: Understanding and responding to complex challenges (p. 176). Springer Nature.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Wicked problems, characterised by conflict, complexity and uncertainty, abound across policy fields. Policy

design scholars and practitioners increasingly respond with policy mixes that should be coherent, robust, and adaptable. Yet these criteria are usually treated as goals to be maximised one at a time, although pursuing any of them too far may involve trade-offs of its own. This panel therefore conceives of good policy mix design as finding a ‘corridor’ in which a mix is effective and acceptable, able to cope with the wicked problems while being acceptable and legitimate to those affected. Where this corridor lies is likely to differ between types of wicked problems, and reaching it depends on governance conditions, including science-policy-society interactions.

We invite theoretical, conceptual, and empirical contributions, using qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods, that examine the design of policy mixes for wicked problems. Papers may address any policy field, such as water, climate, biodiversity, energy, agriculture and food, health or digital technologies, and any level of governance from local to international. Comparative work across problem types, sectors or countries is particularly welcome, as is research co-produced with practitioners.

We especially welcome papers that address one or more of the following questions:

1. Which policy mixes, and which balance of coherence, robustness and adaptability, suit which types of wicked problems?

2. To what degree must these criteria be fulfilled, i.e., where do corridors lie, and how do the criteria reinforce or trade off against each other and against further criteria such as effectiveness and acceptability?

3. Which governance conditions enable such mixes? More specifically, how do science-policy-society interactions help actors to assess and reach suitable corridors?

By bringing together contributions across problem types and policy fields, the panel aims to advance debates on policy design and good governance for wicked problems, and to offer decision-makers orientation on how much coherence, robustness and adaptability is ‘enough’ for the problems they face.