P51 / When Inclusive Policies Produce Unequal Outcomes: Examining the Interplay of Policy Design, Institutional Capacity and Implementation

Topic : Equity, Gender, Inclusion and the Diversity in Public Policy

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Social policies are designed to promote societal well-being through improved access to essential services, reduced inequalities and equitable allocation of public resources. However, translating these normative objectives into equitable outcomes remains a challenge. Even when policies explicitly aim to promote inclusion, their bene?ts are often unevenly distributed across social groups, and geographic regions—despite being governed by uniform policy frameworks. This paradox raises a fundamental puzzle in policy scholarship: why do policies intended to promote inclusion and equity frequently produce or reinforce existing inequalities?

Policy scholars have typically addressed this question through segmented theoretical lenses dividing analytical attention between, policy design, implementation capacity and governance or organizational capacity. On one hand, policy design scholarship illustrates how policy instruments, eligibility rules, and social constructions of target populations systematically allocate bene?ts and burdens across social groups (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). On the other hand, implementation studies emphasize how administrative bottlenecks, resource de?cits, intergovernmental frictions, and frontline discretion undermine policy intent (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973; Lipsky, 1980). While these perspectives o?er valuable insights in isolation, their dynamic interaction remains undertheorized. Complex eligibility rules and standardized policy designs often interact with unequal institutional capacities to generate substantial administrative burdens, shifting the costs of access onto disadvantaged populations and forcing frontline bureaucrats to ration services unevenly. Understanding the persistence of unequal outcomes requires analyzing how policy design choices, organizational resources, and frontline discretion intersect.

Against this background, the panel convenes theoretical, empirical, and comparative research examining why inclusive social policies produce divergent outcomes across social groups, regions, and institutional contexts. It aims to illuminate how policy design, institutional capacity, frontline practices, and governance arrangements interact to shape the distribution of policy impacts and social equity.

To address these objectives, the panel will focus on three interconnected research questions:

1. How do policy designs, administrative instruments, and institutional capacities interact to in?uence the distribution of bene?ts and burdens across di?erent population groups and regions?

2. Under what organizational and political conditions do administrative discretion, street-level practices, and local governance arrangements mitigate or reinforce structural inequalities?

3. How do policy disparities, citizen feedback, and accountability mechanisms shape administrative learning and inform subsequent policy reforms?

The panel encourages comparative research across countries, social policy domains and levels of government, alongside theoretically grounded case studies of speci?c policy settings. Particular attention will be devoted to examining why standardized, "one-size-?ts-all" policy instruments frequently fail to generate equitable outcomes when deployed across uneven local contexts.

The scienti?c contribution of the panel lies in bridging the divide between policy design theories and implementation scholarship through comparative empirical evidence. By identifying the causal mechanisms and contextual conditions that drive disparities in policy delivery, the panel seeks to advance scholarship on policy design, street-level bureaucracy, multi-level governance, and distributive equity.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites theoretical, empirical, and comparative contributions that examine how policy design,

institutional capacity, and implementation processes shape the distribution of policy bene?ts and burdens across di?erent social policy contexts. The panel strongly encourages submissions that move beyond merely documenting disparities in outcomes to uncover the underlying causal processes, administrative mechanisms, and broader contextual realities responsible for these divergent variations in distributional equity.

Contributions are invited on the following interconnected themes:

1. Policy design and equity: How policy instruments, eligibility criteria, administrative requirements, and the social construction of target groups systematically in?uence access to public services and distribute burdens across populations.

2. Macro and Meso institutional capacity: How administrative resources, state capacity, organizational capabilities, and ?scal constraints mediate policy performance and equitable service delivery.

3. Street-Level Bureaucracy and Frontline Discretion: How administrative routines, informal coping mechanisms, and discretionary decisions by frontline workers shape citizen-state interactions and access to entitlements.

4. Multi-level governance and regional disparities: How decentralization, intergovernmental coordination, and territorial asymmetries in institutional capacity produce divergent regional policy outcomes.

5. Accountability, feedback loops, and policy learning: How citizen experiences, administrative grievance procedures, and democratic accountability mechanisms either highlight inequalities to trigger reform or reinforce systemic failure.

6. Comparative policy and contextual transfer: How similar policy frameworks perform across di?erent national, subnational, and sectoral environments, and what these comparative variations reveal about the conditions for equitable implementation.

The panel welcomes research across social policy domains, including social protection, healthcare, education, housing, employment and labour welfare, poverty reduction and the digital delivery of social bene?ts and services. Studies drawing on qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, longitudinal, or comparative designs using primary or secondary data are welcome, as are conceptual and methodological contributions. Submitted abstracts should clearly state the research question, outline theoretical engagement with relevant policy scholarship, describe the methodology, and highlight the institutional or administrative mechanisms shaping outcomes.