Policy Areas and Agenda Setting

1. Policy areas

Areas of policy-making, such as domestic policy, foreign policy, security, economic, environmental, or education policy, are denoted as policy areas. Usually we regard those areas as given without thinking about boundaries between them and possible structures of them. Whether an issue is associated with a certain policy area, indeed, matters. So, more or less powerful policy networks influence the awareness of certain issues. And whether certain policy areas are usual in a country or not, may help understand the process of policy-making and the political system in the country better. That's why it is worthwhile to study the subject of policy areas. A first question of such a study addresses the significance of needs.

1.1 Do policy areas express social needs?

If housing policy is required to make investors invest in building and repairing enough houses, housing should be a broadly accepted policy area in a society. According to this pattern of a principal connection between social needs and politics, policy areas may be considered as expressions of human needs. Hence by knowing the basic needs in a society, we should roughly know the main structure of policy areas there. Starting from this idea, two different answers may be given on the question whether there are similar or dissimilar structures of policy areas in global comparison:

- If there are similar human needs all over the Earth, similar patterns of policy areas should exist - an assumption that might be strengthened by requirements of global communication: Commonly framed policy areas should ease global communication on political affairs, and, vice versa, global communication should foster the exhibition and unfolding of similar policy areas.

- If social needs, in contrast, fundamentally differ between countries or cultures, the main idea of social needs should result in different policy areas. That difference will probably hamper global communication.

Both conclusions can be checked referring to a well-known model of human needs, Abraham Maslow's *hierarchy of needs* (see figure 1).

Figure 1: *Maslow's hierarchy of needs*[1]
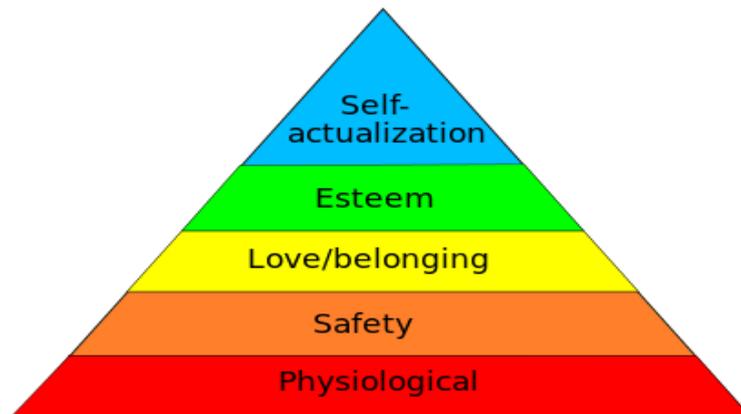
Concluding from this model, physiological needs, such as drinking, eating, and housing, as well as safety needs, such as physical safety and psychological safety, have to be sufficiently met before extended needs, such as esteem and self-actualization, strongly matter. Accordingly physiological basic needs and safety needs should stimulate the development of corresponding policy-areas all over the Earth, an assumption that may be in general come through - see the fact that economic policy, domestic policy, and foreign policy are very usual governmental resorts and policy areas.

Less basic needs, particularly realizations of self-actualization, in contrast, are not to be expected as globally given. Since basic needs are widely satisfied only in developed countries, the significance of those post-materialistic needs sustainability, hitherto has been obviously less developed than basic needs. Corresponding policy areas, such as unpartisan law (justice) and environmental protection/sustainability, then are to be expected to be realized to a less degree. In sum: Since capacities vary in global comparison, the **factor of needs turns into a differentiating factor of policy areas**. This hypothesis may be

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[1] 08 January, 2015: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs

successfully checked by comparing - relatively developed - OECD countries with less developed countries. Also a comparison according to the UN human development index should reaffirm this thesis.

Indeed, if we look more thoroughly at the relations between given capacities on the one side and the unfolding of corresponding policy areas on the other side, we detect **new complexity**: So the significance of basic needs, such as drinking and eating, may furtherly increase in the course of development of a country - see for instance the tendency of people to get fat at least in the first period of an economic upturn and the increasing food business in some rich regions of the world. In contrast, widely fulfilled basic needs, such as housing, may lose their political significance in the course of economic development. So after a war wherein a lot of houses has been destroyed, the (re)building of houses exhibits a very urgent public task and challenge. As soon as all houses have been rebuilt, the demand of housing policy usually decreases...

Other differentiating factors are **socio-cultural and corresponding institutional differences**. So in Islamist theocracies like Saudi-Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan, ministries or other state institutions for religion are institutionalized - a cultural and governmental structure that implies and reinforces corresponding specific policy areas that starkly differ from norms and structures of open societies. There, in contrast, usually ministries of justice deal with issues of religion and other convictions in a more neutral manner.

Beyond this socio-cultural aspect, institutional variances influence the characteristics of policy area structures under level aspects (communal, regional, national, international, global) and interest aspects. Policy areas correspond with different governmental levels and actors - see for instance the European Union's policy area structure that corresponds with the structure of the European Commission and focused issues in the European Union.

The following structure is currently offered by the Commission of the European Union under the heading: *Your Voice in Europe/Consultations by policy area*.

Table 1: *Policy areas in the European Union*

- Agriculture
- Humanitarian Aid
- Banking and finance
- Budget

- Civil Protection
- Climate Action
- Communications Networks
- Competition
- Consumer Affairs
- Culture
- Customs
- Development Aid
- Digital Agenda
- Economic and Financial Affairs
- Education
- Employment
- Energy
- Enlargement
- Enterprise and Industry
- Equal opportunities
- External relations
- Fisheries
- Food Safety
- Home Affairs
- Information Technology
- Internal Market
- Justice and Fundamental Rights
- Mobility
- Public Health
- Regional Policy
- Research and Innovation
- Social Affairs
- Sport
- Taxation
- Trade
- Trans-European Networks
- Transport
- Youth

Source: European Commission[2]

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[2] http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/consultations/links/index_en.htm

Finally, we may understand policy areas as an outcome of developmental processes. So an implicit theory of maturing processes on policy areas has be found in academic literature. *More mature policy networks, characterized through consolidated and consensus-oriented knowledge, through organizations that are able to act and interconnected, through transparent and accepted ways of regulation, as well as through stable ways of financing, admit higher contributions to welfare.*[3]

2. Policy Agenda-Setting

If we go one step further from developmental processes to current agenda-setting, we come to every-day politics. Here concrete policy issues, such as the issue of abortion or the Ukraine conflict, may arise or go down in public attention and on the political agenda. At it, **policy agenda-setting** denotes the current setting of political issues by government, **public agenda-setting** relates to topics focused in a broad public. Both variants of agenda-setting usually are linked with each other.

An abstract model of policy-making and agenda-setting results from John Kingdon's **multiple stream approach**.[4] According to that model, there are three independent streams of political life, policy, problem, and political:

- A **problem stream** can be marked by systematic indicators of a problem, by a sudden crisis, or by feedback that a program is not working as intended;
- A **policy stream** relates to those policy actors and communities who attach their solutions (policies) to emerging problems;
- **Political streams** consist of the public mood, pressure group campaigns, election results, partisan or ideological distributions in Congress, and changes in administration. Other factors include committee jurisdictional boundaries and turf concerns among agencies and government branches.

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[3] Noweski, Michael: dms – der moderne staat – Zeitschrift für Public Policy, Recht und Management, 4. year, vol. 2/2011, p. 481.

[4] Kingdon, J. W. (1994). Agendas, ideas, and policy change. In L. Dodd & C. Jillson (Eds.), New Perspectives on American Politics (pp. 215-299). Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press; Kingdon, J.W. (1995). Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies (2nd edition) New York: Harper Collins.

- When these three streams integrate at a time that is favorable to solve a problem with one's preferred policy and with least resistance, a **window of opportunity** opens up.[5]

As the denotation *opportunity* shows, here public policy making is conceived of as both, as an open process, and as a situation that has to be energetically used to initiate public action. In doing so, agenda-setting play a political role.

In contrast to agenda-setting, *agenda-surfing* denotes a way of integrating policy streams by taking up an unplanned event - for instance a disaster - to pursue own interests. Shifting away a certain issue from the political agenda - i.e. by consciously setting another focus - is denoted as agenda-cutting.

Beyond general preconditions, processes and tactics of that kind, we should deal with the question, what policy issues can be set on the political agenda by certain preconditions. Doing so, we are on the way to a **constellational theory of policy agenda-setting:** In any political process there are discernible constellations of actor motives and influence structures, in short, actor constellations (see lecture 3). Those actor constellations constitute significant preconditions and media of policy agenda-setting:

- Only if there are sufficient common interests amongst the involved actors, any public policy agenda-setting is possible; otherwise there would be nothing but fighting about different agendas, camouflaged or even open forms of war.
- The safest basis of common agenda-setting is the joint perception of a given case of emergency. Under these preconditions, not only directive power to cope with the maw of danger is legitimated; all thinking and feeling of the public is framed by the commonly accepted agenda and the common will to cope best with the given hazard.
- Aside of immediate hazard defense in a case of emergency, there is a bunch of various constellations that enable common agenda-setting. Amongst those constellations are:

    a) legitimate hazard prevention (to a lower degree jointly supported than hazard defense, but to a higher degree than plain political conflicts),

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[5] http://samples.jbpub.com/9781449665098/97768_CH02_Milstead.pdf

b) widely accepted issues of regulation and (re)distribution,

c) widely accepted schedules of public action, such as setting financial issues on the agenda in September because of the coming end of the household period,

d) agenda-setting routines of government and governance.

Against this background, concrete processes of agenda-setting may be understood not only as principally open forms of conflictual decision-making. They, rather, take place in characteristic constellations between process conditions and ways of policy agenda-setting. Those kinds of interaction between politics and policies are a specific subject of multi-dimensional analysis. Here we have only to state: Policy agenda setting, is much more than a reflex of socio-economic needs; it is a crucial element of political life.