Adaptive governance: how and why does government policy change?

Tackling our environmental issues and moving society toward more sustainable ways of living require more responsive forms of governance. Amanda H. Lynch explains how adaptive governance leads to new policy.

What does governance mean, exactly? The word *governance* derives from the Greek verb *kubernan* which means *to steer*. In the modern world, governance describes the use of authority to allocate resources and coordinate activities on behalf of the governed. *Governance* is not the same as *government* – governance describes the mechanics of running any government. So, *good* governance sets and acts on policies that *reliably* yield the desired results, even if those results might be something the governed disagree with. Good government, in a democracy, sets and acts on policies that reflect the will of the people. Ideally, we would seek to have both.

How does policy change? This is where politics comes in. Politics are the giving and withholding of support in making decisions, and occur wherever there are groups of people interacting. To change policy, politics integrates or balances the variety of valid special interests, minimises opposition and mobilises support.

The increasingly dominant form of governance since the origins of modern states in medieval Europe was 'scientific management', although it was only called this after the turn of the 20th century. Scientific management aspired to rise above politics, relying on science as the foundation for reliable policies made through a single central authority, implemented with no regard for local conditions or local knowledge. The preponderance of evidence from general relationships led to policies that were to be accepted as universally applicable scientific theory.

During the last century it became increasingly clear that effective control was dispersed among multiple authorities and interest groups, and that even science could be politically contested. Amid such 20th century realities, scientific management

typically led to policy gridlock.

A response to this gridlock was the development of 'adaptive management', a 'second science' recommended by ecologist C.S. Holling,[1] among others. One assumption underlying this form of governance is that our understanding of the policy problem is always incomplete. Surprise is inevitable. Not only that, the problem itself is a moving target, evolving because of the impact of management.

As scientific management treated policies as universally applicable theory, adaptive management treated policies as hypotheses to be tested. The test applied is the convergence of multiple independent streams of information pointing to the same conclusion, and this is the test that practitioners typically use. The end result

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was learning from experience, but it was always technical learning.

The most definitive test in the end is action. Direct experience in the context at hand is the best preparation for making the obvious inescapable. This is the basis of the third approach: 'adaptive governance'. Adaptive governance is still less well understood than scientific or adaptive management, but characteristically proceeds from the bottom up rather than the top down. Policy makers integrate scientific *and* local knowledge into policies

Parliament House, Canberra. Australian governance is wrestling with new economic, environmental and social influences.
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on particular subjects. Politics are both necessary and unavoidable. Policies are appraised continuously, and the experience is harvested for adaptation, not direct application, elsewhere on a voluntary basis. Because the policies are tested in action, the result is technical, social and institutional learning.

Adaptive governance is the key to successfully tackling 'wicked problems'[2] – problems where there is no optimal solution; indeed, where there may be no definitive solution at all. This approach is applicable to the unknown territory of developing sustainability policies that work on the ground.

We have no general theory to 'dispel wickedness', but adaptive governance gives a means to start heading in roughly the right direction.

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1   See, for example, Holling CS (1995) What barriers? What bridges? In: *Barriers and Bridges to the Renewal of Ecosystems and Institutions.* (Eds LH Gunderson, CS Holling and SS Light) pp. 3–34. Columbia University Press, New York.
2   Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber coined the term 'wicked problems' in their 1973 seminal article 'Dilemmas in a general theory of planning.' *Journal of Policy Sciences* **4**, 155–169.