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A Mainstreaming: Analysis of a Policy Instrument

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In the world of public policy, waves of innovations and new policy developments are usually followed by movements of rationalisation. Most policy domains, in the EU as elsewhere, progressively become institutionalised, a sedimentation of institutions and policy instruments progressively creating a *mille feuilles* within which contradictions take place, hence the drive in due course either to add another layer, to change the institution or to create new instruments to rationalise existing ones. The creation of meta-instruments of cooperation – i.e. in the sense of C. Hood, instruments to coordinate and make more effective existing policy instruments (organization charts, framework agreements) – is therefore a classic policy response to rationalise public policy. Designing meta-instruments is supposed to enable the coordination of traditional instruments.

Mainstreaming is one of those meta-policy instruments. Considering recent negotiations on the EU's budget, mainstreaming has emerged as a policy instrument dedicated to the rationalisation of European finances and policies. In that sense, mainstreaming can be considered as a highly innovative instrument, whose introduction took place when other stronger mechanisms of coordination have failed. Indeed, mainstreaming also helped to resolve political conflicts between member states and European institutions on the priorities of the European regional and social cohesion policies for the 2007-2013 funding period. Its introduction directly led to the suppression of programmes and initiatives that were not receiving enough political support; it also contributes to reinforcing the steering capacity of the Commission over the regional and social cohesion policy through finance mechanisms.

These last features lead us to think about the close links between mainstreaming and the integration principle. What if mainstreaming is indeed an "old wine in a new bottle" (Jordan, Schout, 2006)? Or, looking back in different sectors in which it was introduced, what if mainstreaming is a hero of lost causes?

Drawing on the work done by Lascoumes and Le Galès (2007), we suggest that policy instruments such as mainstreaming, as a particular type of institution, have effects of their own, which result either from their generic dimension, or from constraints that are specific to the political system and the policy field in which they develop. As a device that is both technical and social, policy instruments contribute to stabilising the representation of an issue, to legitimating certain actors and excluding others, as well as to allowing collective action. However, there is no determinism here and the conditions of implementation together with the practice of the actors can lead to very different outcomes.

Further reading

This policy brief is based on research carried out within the NEWGOV project no. 9 on "Choice and Combination of Policy Instruments". The project explores when new policy instruments, based on non-hierarchical steering modes, result in policy change. The project analyses this in different policy sectors, including regional and environmental policy, and state reforms and demonstrate under which conditions the choice of policy instruments contributes to structure policy outcomes and the implementation process in the countries (CEE and SE) under consideration. It will critically examine the import of EU policy instruments and their combination in different regional and national contexts. Further information can be found on the NEWGOV Website in the section of project 9.

Within the EU (and beyond), it is therefore useful to disconnect policy instruments from political goals in order to analyse policy formulation, implementation and changes.

The longitudinal analysis of mainstreaming, its diffusion across several EU policy domains, and its restructuring offers an opportunity to analyse such a process of rationalisation. We understand mainstreaming as both a process and an instrument through which specific issues, such as environmental, gender or urban issues, are addressed horizontally and systematically incorporated at all stages of policy-making and the governance system. The development of mainstreaming is first explained by the failure of a sectoral approach to transectoral issues; by reinforcing the steering capacity through the systematic use of precise tools and techniques, it also has a major political dimension, i.e. to rationalise organisational and financial resources.

1. Is Mainstreaming a European policy instrument?

Mainstreaming was developed as a European policy instrument in order to operationalize the integration principle in the environmental policy domain. However, although policy instruments are usually meant to stabilize the framing of a problem, or the issues related to a specific problem, the stabilization process of the mainstreaming policy instrument was hindered until the late 1990s. In the environment sector in particular, the goals and policy objectives have proved ambitious, with multiple dimensions, different time lengths sometimes contradictory and going in many directions. Competition between different notions of what the environment policy should be was and has remained very vivid.

Despite this classic tension in public policy, the integration principle, derived from international environmental law, emerged at the EU level because of the failure of previous approaches. This is somewhat of a functionalist assumption but our work suggests that the development of an environmental policy sector, for which only the DG Environment and national environment ministries felt responsible at first, was not seen as effective in order to achieve a high degree of environmental protection within the EU. By contrast, the integration principle, strongly linked with the concept of sustainable development, aimed at developing a "transectoral" approach to environmental issues, not only within the Commission and other EU institutions, but in all decisions and policies in the EU at large.

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Turn to our website www.eu-newgov.org which offers topical information concerning the project, in particular publications, reports, articles and working papers of the Research Consortium for download, links to other information sources relating to the project's research fields, as well as regularly updated information on events organised in the framework of NEWGOV.

2. Mainstreaming: an instrument derived from the international environmental policy?

The integration principle was formulated during the UN Conference on the Human Environment (1972) and later introduced in international environmental law. However, as argued elsewhere, the legal meaning and significance of this principle remains to be defined (Nollkaemper, 2002: 24, in Lenschow 2002). Although there was (and still is) no clear understanding at international level on this principle's meaning and status, it was considered as a possible solution to the problems (e.g., coordination, political will, etc.) raised by a sectoral approach of environmental issues and to environmental-poverty linkage. However, Environmental Mainstreaming as such was only introduced in the Millenium Declaration (2000) in order to operationalise both the integration and the sustainable development principles (UNDP, 2004: 9). It clearly draws on the experience gathered from gender mainstreaming and in Europe, at

both the national and EU levels, with the environmental integration principle.

Interestingly enough, the process through which environmental mainstreaming emerged as an autonomous policy instrument at the European level presents numerous similarities with the phenomenon observed at international level. At the European level too, in the absence of a clear understanding of the integration principle's meaning and status Environmental Mainstreaming only emerged as an autonomous EU policy instrument after it had developed in other policy contexts. Moreover, the lack of clarity of the integration principle was replicated at the EU level when the integration principle was first introduced in the Single European Act, since member states could not agree upon a common definition. As is often the case, this did not prevent the formulation of an "ambiguous consensus" (Palier, 2004, in Lascoumes, Le Galès, 2007) allowing, perhaps accelerating, the formal introduction of this notion in the Single European Act but hindering its operationalisation through the mainstreaming policy instrument until the Cardiff Process (1998).

The political consensus around the integration principle had mainly to do with the fact that it put an end to endless debates concerning the role of environmental protection: economic competition and environmental protection were not seen anymore as competing objectives, but as complementary. However, despite this political consensus and until the Amsterdam Treaty, the integration principle was understood in its most limited approach, i.e. it addresses only Community institutions whereas it was neither applied to Member states nor to all policies throughout the European Union (Lenschow, 2002). Member states had indeed very different understandings of the integration principle. From a German perspective for example, the integration principle created new opportunities to achieve the ecological modernisation of national and/or European industries and to serve as an offensive trade policy; whereas from a British perspective, this principle was considered as a major rationalisation tool both at national and EU levels, at the risk of diluting the objectives of the European environmental policy. These competing representations explain that the formulation and, later, the implementation of mainstreaming as a European policy instrument within the Cardiff process led to various outcomes. Although mainstreaming was designed in order to create synergies and to mobilize actors and resources around environmental issues, it failed in creating a sense of collective responsibility around environmental issues during the first decade of its existence.

Following a longitudinal approach to the evolution of mainstreaming, we argue that it only fully stabilised as a policy instrument when used in other policy domains, such as the EU regional and social cohesion policies. Indeed, mainstreaming fully developed during the 1999-2006 funding period as a major gatekeeper for environmental issues, whereas its rationalisation dimension disappeared. Structural and cohesion funds indirectly contributed, through mainstreaming, to ensure the implementation of the EU environmental policy and to the diffusion of the *acquis communautaire*.

3. Mainstreaming in the EU gender policy: a first step towards stabilisation

Decisively, the introduction of mainstreaming in EU gender policy contributed to the stabilisation of this policy instrument. Gender mainstreaming was adopted in the Amsterdam Treaty with the objective of integrating a gender perspective into all policy EU policies so that any policy or action developed and implemented by the EU does not impede the principle of gender equality. The adoption of mainstreaming to combat gender inequality is first explained by the failure of previous approaches, i.e. the development of a policy sector "gender inequality", and is justified because it is "transectoral". Gender inequalities exist in all sorts of policy domains, hence must be addressed through transversal policy instruments. The logic is also to rationalise, i.e. the mainstreaming instrument is then operationalised in a diverse set of more precise policy tools and techniques.

The adoption of this new policy instrument did not raise much opposition in the gender inequality domain. This is uncommon as any policy change tends to foster some conflicts, but: 1) mainstreaming was not creating a new policy sector entering into competition with others; 2) since it was supposed to be transectoral, every DG had to do something about it but without clear sanction and constraints, it was not a command and control. Typically, the goals

were ambitious, the instrument was a meta-instrument to coordinate different other instruments (gender assessment guide, good practice, control lists, scoreboards, formation programme…) and there was no competition for resources as it is not linked to a specific budget; 3) Finally, the instrument was very legitimate politically and it would have been difficult to openly oppose it.

However, the effect of mainstreaming on the commission has proved disappointing (Hafner-Burton Pollack, 2000). In most services, some effort was made to develop statistics, to produce report on the situation, to play the benchmark game. Despite the introduction of "naming and shaming" instruments, most DG's within the Commission were able to fulfil the required procedures and to produce information without contributing much more to the combat against gender inequality. In that sense, mainstreaming, another new policy instrument started by the Commission has proved not irrelevant, but disappointing to change internally EU policies and practices.

However, the instrument has also changed the structure of opportunity for actors. Jacquot (2006) precisely documents the fact mainstreaming provided a major incentive to mobilise actors outside the Commission. In terms of actors, the policy domain of gender inequality was, before mainstreaming, controlled by a small number of experts and EU civil servants. The introduction of mainstreaming has led by contrast to the mobilisation of a whole range of new groups in different policy areas interested in this agenda: it has blurred the frontiers of the policy domain and its experts. Womens' groups in particular were able to use this instrument to mobilise for new goals, to widen their objectives, to legitimate themselves in dialogue with the commission and to put pressure on the commission to act more decisively on gender inequality. As mainstreaming stated that gender inequality had to be addressed in all policy domains, womens' groups were able to mobilise and to lobby in all those policy domains. Those pressure groups have become more professionalized and more active in all EU policy domains. They lead to more long-term incremental changes in policies and practices.

4. Conclusion

Policy instrument alone does not explain the whole policy change in the domain of gender inequality. However, the instrument "mainstreaming" does not just reveal the change, it played an important part in the process and exerted its own influence in the process. In this sense, although this is only a soft instrument without the constraints associated with a law, gender mainstreaming has organised and oriented policy change. Its diffusion to what remains of the European urban policy since the termination of the URBAN Community Initiative confirms the stabilisation of this policy instrument at the EU level. Drawing on its career in the domain of gender inequality, one could argue that mainstreaming could have contributed to creating synergies and to mobilizing actors and resources around urban issues at European level, thus to institutionalising EU competence in this policy domain. However, negotiations prior to the 2007-2013 funding period have shown that neither the Commission nor the Member states, which had pushed for the emergence of urban issues on the European agenda in the first place, would support such an evolution. In this context, urban mainstreaming might accompany the European urban policy to its early death.

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