

The power of instruments. Making universal designs for public policy and governance

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Abstract

Globally circulating templates for policy design are referred to as “instruments”. As such they guide and legitimate policy-making. This entails a delegation of agency from democratically regulated policy processes to the making of instruments. By pre-configuring options of policy-making instruments attain a specific power in governance. We open up the making of instruments for conceptual and empirical analysis by offering a heuristic approach to investigate the making of instruments as innovation processes in governance. A study of the historical development of two cases, “emissions trading” and “citizen panels”, reveals theory- and practice led dynamics as well as the organization of “instrument constituencies” that cater for the development of a particular policy instrument. Further findings relate to a specific momentum of instrument development emanating from a dynamic of “techno-logy”, i.e. theoretical discourse of means decoupled from political ends. We translate this into a discussion of ambivalences related to own dynamics of instrument development, independent of societal concerns and demand, a disposition to produce side-effects, and a displacement of politics from democratically controlled arenas to a discourse among experts. Our conclusions thus argue for the making of instruments to become an integral part of the study of politics and for making instrument design a topic of broader public debate.

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