

## **Reflexive Governance. Accounting for a shift of perspective in emerging practices of governing**

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Over the past decades, new practices of governing have emerged which reflect a shift of perspective through which relations between governance and society are understood. Instead of a subject of governing (often government or the state) separate from and independent of the object to be governed (such as particular problem settings, sectors or regions) new images of governance include a multitude of governing subjects with interfering strategies who are themselves embedded in, and thus framed and constrained by, a particular social (and technological and ecological) context. Such images undermine the assumption of a detached, neutral, apolitical standpoint on the “outside” from where society could be governed.

This shift induces a search for new governing practices which can be observed across a range of different domains (e.g. ecosystem management, technology assessment, research management). Experiments with new forms of governance are undertaken that start from the assumption that goals, knowledge and power of governing are themselves embedded in and interacting with broader dynamics of societal development. This implies that basic elements of a rational-instrumental governing approach, such as the definition of unambiguous goals, prognostic knowledge and centralised capacities of influence are not applicable. Alternative forms of governance are sought that put ambiguous goals, uncertain knowledge and distributed power upfront and seek practical ways to cope with them (through methods like participatory vision-building, deliberative appraisal, scenario planning, impact assessment, experimental steering, network governance).

In this paper we present the notion of reflexive governance as a concept that seeks to account for those emerging forms of governance. We propose a conceptual framework which allows to put them in relation with each other, undertake comparison, and ease communication and learning across their different discursive backgrounds and sites of experimentation.

We proceed as follows. In the first part we present an overview on new governing practices that emerge in the context of different areas of governance. In the second part we develop the notion and framework of reflexive governance and link it with literatures from policy analysis, sociological institutionalism, and governance studies. In the third part we use this framework to analyse governing practices and argue for their commonalities as reflexive governance practices. The fourth and final part discusses how this particular notion of reflexive governance is able to catalyse new strands of governance research and where its limitations lie.

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