



Policy integration and the eco-social debate in political analysis

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Abstract

In political research, scholars have increasingly paid attention to the political challenges of integrating new public policies into existing policy subsystems, which bears important implications for the study of eco-social policy and politics. By drawing on policy integration research, we identify and discuss insights and lessons deriving from policy integration scholarship, which appear to be relevant for understanding policy linkages between the social and environmental domains especially regarding the European Green Deal (EGD). More specifically, we focus on the following two aspects: (1) the elements of policy design and implementation practices that are deemed to be helpful for ensuring equilibrium between social and environmental goals and (2) political factors that are likely to affect policy integration dynamics along the social and environmental aspects (eco-social nexus). This article contributes to the literature by tracing novel research trajectories for the eco-social debate to explore in the policy integration perspective.

Keywords Social policy · Environmental policy · Politics · Policy design · Policy implementation

Introduction

Academic investigation into the political consequences of the move toward sustainability and the accompanying societal hurdles has risen in significance. However, various conceptual, analytical, and empirical issues remain to be resolved. Presently, most of the policy discussion regarding sustainable transitions focuses on climate

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change adaptation and mitigation. Nevertheless, an important aspect of public policies toward sustainable transition such as the European Green Deal (EGD) emphasizes that the need for environmentally friendly transitions must be done in a socially just manner. For instance, public policies that seek to decrease emissions should be created in such a way as to prevent the creation of new disparities (Meadowcroft 2009; Meadowcroft et al. 2012).

This article explores some of the political challenges that come along with putting into place public policies for green transitions in a socially responsible way by exploring the implications of the literature on policy coordination and integration. This research has demonstrated that the task of combing different policies can be complicated not only due to the difficulty to balance potentially conflicting goals or to match appropriate instruments, but also because of tensions between various policy subsystems. Policy subsystems¹ are communities of diverse actors that are specialized in particular policy fields that work together, e.g., regarding unemployment, economic growth, or environmental protection (Hill and Varone 2021; Howlett et al. 2020; Knill and Tosun 2020; Weible and Sabatier 2018). Coordinating actors and organizations that belong to different policy subsystems is complicated due to conflicting interests, beliefs, organizational turf defending, and policy styles (Cairney et al. 2021; Peters 2015), which constitute the relative autonomy of policy subsystems (Cairney and Weible 2017).

This article makes a conceptual contribution to this Symposium by reflecting on political challenges for the eco-social policy agenda along the following lines. First, the article identifies elements of policy design and implementation practices that are deemed to be relevant for ensuring equilibrium between social and environmental goals. Second, the article discusses pitfalls and trade-offs of policy integration across the social and environmental domains. Third, the text analyses political factors that are likely to affect policy integration dynamics along the eco-social nexus.

The eco-social debate from a policy perspective

As the introduction to this symposium illustrates (Cotta, 2023), scholars have largely reflected on the general compatibility and trade-offs between social, environmental, and economic objectives (Meadowcroft 2009; Meadowcroft et al. 2012), discussing the normative issues and societal tensions related to the need of addressing the social costs of ecological transition by specific policies (Fritz and Koch 2014; Gough et al. 2011; Gough 2016; Gugushvili and Otto 2023). More recently, scholarly attention has been directed to the practical policy solutions aimed at solving potential tensions and trade-offs between environmental and social domains (Büchs and Koch 2019; Hirvilammi et al. 2023).

This article focuses on the political consequences of this agenda by discussing how the eco-social agenda can be integrated into existing public policies. The previous literature has already examined policy capacity, i.e., the ability of the state

¹ I.e., policy sectors and policy fields; we use the terms synonymously.



to carry and to deal with new challenges, in the context of the eco-social transition (Gough et al. 2011). Furthermore, the following aspects of policy design have received scholarly attention in this context: (1) the type of mitigation instruments to adopt to support sustainable welfare policies (Büchs et al. 2011); (2) policy instruments that bring about eco-social (co)benefits (Bohnenberger 2020); and (3) mutual impacts of social and environmental policy instruments (i.e., greening labor market policies) (Sabato and Fronteddu 2020). The European Union (EU) context is especially important in this regard, because the European Green Deal has the ambition to reconcile environmental and social goals across a range of sectors (Sabato et al. 2021; Mandelli 2022; Theodoropoulou et al. 2022; Petmesidou et al. 2023).

Eco-social policies and policy integration challenges

How does the policy integration perspective help improve our understanding of the political challenges of eco-social policies? Originally, policy integration research has focused on the integration of new policy problems (issues and goals?) into existing policies. For example, scholars have pointed to the necessity to integrate environmental priorities and concerns into existing policies and to build environmental protection measures coherently to other policy instruments (Briassoulis 2017; Jordan and Lenschow 2010). Furthermore, the literature has used the term for the analysis of other policy problems, such as social policy (Tosun and Lang 2017; Trein et al. 2021).

Also, scholars have used policy integration as an umbrella term for different concepts that analyze efforts linking between policy subsystems as well as levels of government in policy processes, such as holistic governance or whole-of-government (Tosun and Lang 2017). Yet, there is some agreement in the literature that policy integration goes beyond policy coordination between administrative organizations (Cejudo and Michel 2017; Trein and Maggetti 2020), as it also includes the process of formulating new public policies thus involving political actors and interests.

In a broader perspective, policy integration has been defined as a process that entails integrating policy frames, policy goals, policy instruments, and policy subsystems (Candel and Biesbroek 2016). Indeed, the political nature of policy integration and the consequences of the subsystem structure for the policy integration process has increasingly attracted scholarly attention (Cejudo and Trein 2023). Notably, if governments use the policy integration agenda to depoliticize issues, it becomes difficult to implement integrative policy strategies with new policy capacities. Creating financial and staff capacities to really integrate policies requires the presence of boundary-spanning actors that link different policy subsystems. Otherwise, there is a high likelihood that policy changes are implemented within existing policy subsystems in a sectoral approach that does not do justice to the cross-cutting policy goals (Cejudo and Trein 2023).

Another important aspect for policy integration regarding the eco-social linkage can be drawn from the research on policy mixes, which explores how different policy goals and/or instruments can be effectively combined. This strand of research identifies the criteria to be met for policy mixes to be successful, namely,



complementarity, consistency, and coherence (Capano and Howlett 2020; Cejudo and Michel 2021; Howlett et al. 2017). This means that “integrated” policy portfolios should ensure: *consistency*, or the ability of multiple policy tools to reinforce rather than undermine each other in the pursuit of policy goals; *coherence*, or the ability of multiple policy goals to co-exist with each other and with instrument norms in a logical fashion; and *congruence*, or the ability of goals and instruments to work together in a unidirectional or mutually supportive fashion (Kern et al. 2019; Lanzalaco 2011; Rayner and Howlett 2009).

A policy integration perspective has been somewhat implicit in the current eco-social debate, denoting above all the integration of environmental protection and social equality in the context of climate policies. The demand for just transition (Sabato and Fronteddu 2020) implies for policy integration that eco-social policies should be consistent (reinforcing rather than undermine each other’s goals), be coherent (co-exist in a logical fashion), and are congruent (work together in a way to support each other). Though being frequently referred to in both the scholarly debate and policy documents on eco-social policies, these criteria have not been systematically elaborated upon, and the way in which political factors matter for their presence or absence has not been investigated yet.

For example, scholars point out that the EGD requires considering four goals: *environmental sustainability*, *productivity growth*, *fairness*, and *stability* (Sabato and Fronteddu 2020, 20), which stand out as new EU normative propositions. In practice, integrating such broad goals into a single policy challenges decision-makers who need to balance different interests and ideological positions. From this perspective, policy integration at the EU level has been insufficient in the past due to a “silos” mentality and the lack of an overarching strategic framework (Sabato and Mandelli 2018), even though, the integration of SDGs into the European Semester framework, also in connection with the EGD, has led to improved inter-service coordination between the different Directorate Generals of the European Commission (Sabato and Mandelli 2018). In a similar vein, Koch noticed “that the EU fails to explicitly discuss the ‘potential tensions between its ambitious climate targets and its other policy goals such as economic growth, material prosperity and social welfare’,” and that, “the co-existence of a plethora of other non-environmental goals raises several policy coordination challenges. In practice, much of the burden to coordinate economic, social and environmental priorities to meet the goals defined at European level is left to the Member States” (Koch et al. 2018, 39).

Political challenges to integrate eco and social policies

Among multiple political challenges that decision-makers face when designing and implementing integrated policies, this article emphasizes four factors to be particularly relevant for eco-social policies, such as the EGD: the political temptation of integrated policy strategies, the political consequences of the subsystem logic, the absence of boundary-spanning actors, and the limitations of top-down vs. bottom-up policy integration.



The political temptation of integrated policy strategies

An important insight for understanding the eco-social linkage from a policy integration perspective is that governments use integrated political strategies to set the policy agenda or policy programs to address an important issue that spans across different policy sectors, or to promote far-reaching reforms that deal with an important and complex policy problem (Rayner and Howlett 2009). For example, governments have used integrated strategies regarding climate change (Uittenbroek et al. 2013), different public health topics (Trein 2018), and digitalization (Radu 2021).

Such strategies simultaneously address several policy goals and may be politically appealing as they allow to respond comprehensively to multiple societal demands but may at the same time have a depoliticizing effect. While outlining a broad agenda for policy change, they often lack concrete proposals about the specific attribution of funds and personnel, overlooking the regulation of economic and social practices that caused the problem they aim to address. Put differently, such strategies may aim at avoiding political conflicts (Fawcett et al. 2017) and be used by governments as a window-dressing exercise to seemingly respond to diverse policy demands to avoid potential policy failures (Cejudo and Trein 2022). In the realm of eco-social policies, which indeed contain inherent conflicts and tensions, this scenario implies that politicians and/or public servants launch policy reforms spanning across environmental and social policy subsystems, but do not follow-up by creating appropriate cross-cutting policy instruments and/or administrative and financial capacities to ensure that policy integration goals are accomplished.

The political consequences of the subsystem logic

The second political challenge for integrating the social and environmental domains comes from the subsystem structure of the political system, which also determines the landscape of public policy actors. This means that specialized actors work on particular policy issues within the related subsystems, such as labor market policy, energy, financial policy, transportation, and environmental protection (Hill and Varone 2021; Howlett et al. 2020; Knill and Tosun 2020; Lasswell 1970; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Weible and Sabatier 2018).

This structure implies two potential barriers to the design and implementation of eco-social policies. Firstly, we know from the literature on historical policy analysis that actors who established policy subsystems cling to the stability of policy instruments if they benefit from such structures, either materially (e.g., interest groups representing economic and professional actors), politically (e.g., elected officials whose voters like a particular policy), or interpretatively (e.g., as some existing policy structures represent a particular governance style) (Jacobs et al. 2021; Mettler and SoRelle 2018; Pierson 2000).

Accordingly, it seems feasible to expect that existing subsystems would resist the changes needed for the integration of social and environmental aspects. For example, an eco-social approach might require that energy transition measures not only



increase green energy production but also an employment policy-related approach including professional training for new jobs, relocation, or even income support to the workers who risk losing their jobs because of industrial restructuring. Secondly, eco-social policies need new knowledge and practices of policymaking and implementation, which contrast with the professional training and job experiences that have consolidated within existing policy subsystems. Professional identities and practices, which revolved around traditional policy sectors, might impede consistency, coherence, and congruence between ecological and social aspects (Peters 2015).

The absence of boundary-spanning actors

The third challenge for eco-social policies is related to the absence of boundary-spanning actors in the policy process. Studies on policy integration have indicated that actors who are able to span across different policy subsystems can contribute to successfully establish policy integration reforms. Under certain conditions, the presence of a policy entrepreneur (Trein et al. 2021) or a committed leader (Rietig and Dupont 2021) can become a driver for policy integration reforms. Similar insights come from the scholarship on agricultural policies and antimicrobial resistance, emphasizing the importance of boundary-spanning actors, i.e., policy actors who actively seek to connect between and across different policy sectors (Faling et al. 2019; Vogeler et al. 2021). These findings imply that such boundary-spanning could contribute to designing effective integrated eco-social policies. Shared platforms for established actors (e.g., environmental non-governmental organizations, green parties, trade unions, and left parties), such as policy forums (Fischer and Leifeld 2015), could help to achieve boundary-spanning policy entrepreneurship.

Top-down versus bottom-up policy integration

Finally, the eco-social policy integration may face political challenge along the top-down vs. bottom-up dimensions of policy integration and coordination. Traditionally, the policy integration literature has conceived of policy integration as a top-down exercise where national governments integrate new policy goals into existing sectoral public policies, which, in turn, require implementation by lower levels of government (6 2004; Christensen and Lægreid 2007; Tosun and Lang 2017). Nevertheless, in a more recent contribution, Domorenok and Tosun 2022 have pointed out that bottom-up policy integration is another way of how policies could be practically integrated without referring to a pre-established integrated policy framework. In fact, many examples exist of how lower levels of government, e.g., regional or municipal governments, can take independent action to integrate ecological and social policies (Winston 2022).

This perspective implies important political challenges for eco-social policies. From a top-down perspective, the ambition of and the commitment to eco-social strategies by actors at lower levels of government should not be taken for granted. As Meadowcroft et al. (Meadowcroft et al. 2005: 21) point out, “Important dimensions



of variation in the contours of the ecostate in different countries are likely to include, among others, (1) the trade-offs between central and regional or local decision-making (especially important in federal states); (2) the extent to which the state is involved in collective decisions about environmental futures above and beyond the minimum requirements of crisis avoidance.” A bottom-up policy perspective and drive in eco-social policies may entail strong fragmentation and, consequently, the difficulty to share, upscale, and institutionalize successful policy integration policies and practices.

Conclusions

To sum up, policy integration studies suggest several research directions to be explored in the perspective of the eco-social debate and the research question outlined by this Symposium. The above overview has illustrated how a policy integration approach may help in analyzing the specific political challenges that eco-social transition policies such as the EGD pose to decision-makers. This includes especially the need to ensure consistency, coherence, and congruence between goals, instruments, and subsystems that deal with both environmental and social policy matters. The development of integrated governance architectures can also be challenged as the consolidated “silos” mentality underpinning sectoral logics needs to be overcome to enhance synergies and effectively solve multiple trade-offs along the eco-social axis at the different territorial levels. Finally, political challenges related to the absence of boundary-spanning actors who could advocate and promote a truly integrated eco-social agenda appear to be the most challenging issue, as it requires the transformation of norms, values, and underlying beliefs about social and environmental costs and benefits of green transition.

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