

20 Investigating Policy Processes: The Governance Analytical Framework (GAF)

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Abstract

Societies develop ways of making decisions regarding collective problems, thereby creating norms, rules, and institutions; this is what governance is about. In policy research, governance has become an important focus of attention; but debates show a lack of clarity at the conceptual level and a confusion between the use of the concept for prescriptive and analytical purposes. The present article is based on the hypothesis that using a clarified, non-normative governance perspective in policy research can contribute to an improved understanding of political processes, including formal and unrecognised ones, those embedded in larger and smaller social systems, as well as both vertical and horizontal political arrangements. The paper is the result of a collaborative engagement with the concept of governance within several networks, leading to the development of the Governance Analytical Framework (GAF). The GAF is a practical methodology for investigating governance processes, based on five analytical tools: problems, actors, social norms, processes, and nodal points. Besides describing the conceptual sources and analytical purpose of these five tools, the paper presents examples of how the GAF can be operationalised.

Keywords: Governance; governance processes; social norms; institutions; nodal points.

20.1 Introduction

This paper presents the Governance Analytical Framework (GAF), a practical methodology for investigating governance processes. The GAF was developed in the context of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South research programme. The point of departure for this project goes back to a growing unease with the way in which the concept of ‘governance’ was increasingly being used by both academics and practitioners as of the 1990s. A striking characteristic of this inflationary trend was the absence of conceptual consistency. By the time the GAF project began, ‘governance’ had become a *passe-partout* in managerial, political, and economic discourses, but there was no common definition and it was ideologically charged, having been used in the context of structural adjustment programmes and market-inspired reforms of public administrations. Using it in an academic and research context was therefore a challenge.

The basic question is: Does governance add something new in the scientific field, and if yes, what exactly? There is clearly a need for a definition. In order to be used in basic and action research, and to facilitate empirical observations, this definition has to be associated with a value-free methodology. To meet various research needs, this methodology has to be flexible and sophisticated enough to be applicable at different levels, from relatively simple ‘technical’ case studies to more complex theoretical investigations.

The decision to take the concept of governance seriously and to elaborate such a methodology was made in several steps. The first was a young researchers’ seminar at the Graduate Institute of Development Studies (Hufty et al 2007). Then came decisive contributions from the NCCR North-South and from the Latin American Governance, Equity, and Health (GEH)² networks. The GAF project was presented on several occasions, especially at a symposium held in November 2007 in Geneva.³ As the project went on, more case studies confirmed great interest in the methodology. This paper presents a revised version of the Governance Analytical Framework, taking into account many suggestions and comments. It builds on another article in the present volume, entitled “Governance: Exploring four approaches and their relevance to research” (Hufty 2011).

20.2 Conceptual background of the GAF project

20.2.1 Definition of governance

Governance refers to a category of social facts, namely the processes of interaction and decision-making among the actors involved in a collective problem that lead to the creation, reinforcement, or reproduction of social norms and institutions. Each society develops its own ways of making decisions and resolving conflicts. This is what governance is about. Therefore, as a social fact, governance is neither normative nor prescriptive: it refers to an observable phenomenon. Nor is it limited to any time or space, as it is observable in any human society. Decision-making processes, social norms, and institutions are inherent to social life, allowing members of any society to live together and cooperate, even without a state. It is now widely acknowledged that there are political processes at work in non-state societies as well (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Balandier 1967; Clastres 1974). Thus, governance does not presuppose vertical authority and regulatory power as the concept of ‘political system’ and the traditional idea of ‘politics’ do. It refers to formal and informal, vertical and horizontal processes, with no a priori preference. It is my contention that in policy research, using a governance perspective permits the inclusion of all political processes, including formal ones, those embedded in larger social systems, and unrecognised ones.

20.2.2 Criteria

Based on the above definition of the object of study, a methodology (a system of methods) for observing and analysing governance processes is proposed below: the Governance Analytical Framework (GAF). Building on earlier work (Hufty 2005, 2007), a set of six criteria which this methodology has to meet is presented below: the GAF should be realistic (non-normative), interdisciplinary, reflexive, comparative, generalisable, and operational.

Realistic: This criterion refers to the capacity of the methodology to describe the facts as they are, and not as they ought to be according to pre-defined stances. This is a major difference compared with normative approaches (e.g. the approaches examined in Hufty 2011, in this volume). The GAF should make it possible to describe/analyse a problem without implying a ready-made solution. It could be compared to a pair of binoculars: the instrument magnifies what we are looking at, sharpening our view and permitting us to see details we were unable to perceive before, but it does not prescribe

any normative orientations. Used in this way, by contrast with the normative approaches, governance is not seen as a model which should or should not be encouraged. There cannot be ‘good’ or ‘better’ governance without an external ideology giving an orientation to the way it is evaluated. It is, obviously, possible to evaluate a governance process and compare it with others based on predetermined postures (e.g., is it socially just or democratic?), but this is a distinct operation, with a purpose different from that of providing a realistic description and analysis.

This question reverberates in one of the major, and as yet unresolved, controversies in epistemology: positivism/empiricism versus relativism/constructivism. Without going into details, the position taken here is close to ‘weak constructivism’ (Searle 1995) or critical realism (Bhaskar 1975). There are crude facts or primary qualities (e.g., different groups are in disagreement on how to manage a protected area), but the concepts to describe and interpret them (to give them meaning), or secondary qualities, are subjective, constructed, and socially agreed or disputed (e.g., is centralised state management better than community-based management?). The implication is that the GAF must, as much as possible, allow hard facts to be described and analysed in a non-normative and non-prescriptive way, whereas their interpretation is based on subjective approaches.

Interdisciplinary: This criterion refers to the need for the GAF to (1) consider governance as a ‘bridge concept’ (Hufty and Muttenger 2006) linking different disciplines, and (2) facilitate interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research. This involves “a research approach constructed by methodically assembling knowledge, points of view, and work techniques from different scientific disciplines” (Jollivet and Legay 2005, p 184). The first step towards interdisciplinarity is the joint construction (or reconstruction) of an object of study, rather than simply dividing it according to disciplines (pluridisciplinarity). Interdisciplinarity allows the GAF to break away from narrow approaches limited to political science or economics, and turns governance into a concept bridging sociology, anthropology, law, economics, geography, and other disciplines.⁴ A second step is the adoption of a transdisciplinary approach. The classical definition of transdisciplinarity, drawn up from a humanist perspective, would call for a purposeful elimination of borders between disciplines to overcome the sterilising effect of the artificial barriers and overspecialisation produced by the historical development of science and disciplines (Morin 1990). An alternative model (Pohl 2001; Thomson Klein et al 2001; Hirsch Hadorn et al 2006) builds on the same

transcendence, but also suggests that the persons whose practices are being observed (the ‘stakeholders’) should be involved in the research process from the start to enable co-production of knowledge (Pohl et al 2010). This model proposes to base research on four principles: “focus on life-world problems, transcending and integrating of disciplinary paradigms, participatory research, and the search for unity of knowledge beyond disciplines” (Aeberhard and Rist 2009, p 1173).

Reflexive: Interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity both imply the idea of reflexivity, defined as involving a systematic reflection on researchers’ influence on the research process and the information produced.⁵ This assumes the impossibility for researchers to be completely neutral. In consequence, researchers have to consider themselves as actors. Their definition of the problem, selection of tools for observation and interpretation, and interactions with the other actors participating in an observed governance process have to be integrated into the analysis.

Generalisable, comparative, and operational: As mentioned above, governance processes take place in any society at any time. In the present article, ‘society’ is used to refer to a group of people who are engaged in long-term relations and share a space and some cultural aspects. The GAF must make it possible to compare governance processes taking place in a given society with those going on in other spaces or times. Finally, the GAF needs to be operational, that is, suitable for analysing concrete empirical situations (this is developed further in section 20.4 below).

20.3 The Governance Analytical Framework

The GAF consists basically of five coherently linked analytical tools: problems, social norms, actors, nodal points, and processes. Problems are sets of interrelated issues at stake. Actors or stakeholders are individuals or groups whose collective action leads to the formulation of the social norms that guide, prescribe, and sanction collective and individual behaviour. Norms are themselves modified by collective interactions, which may be observed at nodal points, meaning the physical or virtual interfaces where problems, processes, actors, and norms converge. ‘Processes’ refers to these complex interactions over time. Actors, norms, and processes may be formal, that is, recognised by those actors who hold authority in the society under study (this recognition can be ‘legal’ in societies with positive law), or informal, that is, defined by the actors’ practices.

20.3.1 Defining the problem

The first step in applying the GAF is to understand and clearly define the issues at stake, or to ‘deconstruct’ and ‘reconstruct’ the problem. This step is based on the assumption that problems are social constructions. There are unquestionable hard facts (e.g. land erosion on a mountain slope), but they represent ‘problems’ at a social level (e.g., marginalised peasant families are forced to cultivate sloping lands in unsustainable conditions due to unequal property structures, the issues being access to land, marginalisation, and diminishing productivity). Thus, in any given situation, what is at stake may be completely different for each actor. What is a problem for some can be an advantage for others (e.g. soil that is washed downhill and fertilises lowland fields) (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987). Actors, including the researchers, each have their own understanding of a given situation. This is explained by their positions in society and their habitus (Bourdieu 1980), and it is observed in their practices and discourses (Hajer 1995). Accepting this plurality of world views is a basic condition for a realistic perspective.

Each actor tries to impose their view on two aspects: the nature of the problem and the rules of the game for the negotiation process (how are decisions made? who is going to be part of the process and with what status? what system of rights applies? etc.). ‘Setting the agenda’ in this ‘upstream governance’ or ‘meta-governance’ process is already a power game. Actors mobilise their resources and try to impose their view by persuasion, by ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu 1980), by force, or by a combination of these, which often leads to resistance (Scott 1985). The way in which problems are defined and the power relations that this process entails are a crucial aspect of a GAF analysis.

Researchers inevitably face the question of how to define the problem. Aware of this meta-governance process, should they accept the problem as it is presented to them by the actors? And whose version should they adopt? In case of an external mandate, the problem is usually defined by the principal and the researchers’ room for manoeuvre is limited. But if the question is open, they can choose between adopting a predetermined research problem or deconstructing and reconstructing it. If they choose to reconstruct it, they can do so in two ways. One is to use the classical method of confronting documents and evidence obtained in interviews or direct observation and reconstruct the problem by themselves. The other option is to define the problem jointly with the stakeholders, as prescribed by the transdisciplinary approach to research, knowing that problems perceived by the actors are

often formulated in simple and concrete ways, or as ‘social issues’ (e.g., “my son is sick and I don’t have the money to buy medication”), and that a reconstruction of the problem involves the conversion of these issues into generalised ‘sociological problems’ (e.g. inequitable access to health services). Both ways can provide much information for future intervention, allow an in-depth understanding of the issues at stake, and avoid the situation of imposing predefined solutions.

20.3.2 Understanding social norms

What is at stake, beyond the immediate problems, are social norms. These include, at a first level – the level of governance – the ‘rules of the game’, and at a second level – ‘meta-governance’ – the rules that determine how the rules of the game are established.

In any society, agreements between actors and joint decisions lead to the formulation of norms, which may be defined in general terms as shared beliefs about what is considered appropriate behaviour in a given society (what is ‘normal’). Norms guide actors’ behaviour and are modified by collective action, as classic institutional economics teaches us (Commons 1934); these dynamics are captured by the ‘agency–structure’ concept (Bourdieu 1977; Wendt 1987). Norms are ultimately based on values or beliefs: people have a sense of what is right or wrong. Norms include elements of prescription (what one should or should not do) and of sanction (positive, reinforcing the behaviour, or negative, constraining it). Norms are directly related to social institutions, defined as recurrent systems of social norms that guide and sanction the actions of individuals and groups.⁶ When norms recur, they become institutionalised, meaning they are internalised by individuals and help to form an institution.

The concept of social norms includes all types of norm, whether legal, customary, or informal. In any society, different norms or systems of norms are in competition for a given question at any time; they co-exist and overlap. This situation of ‘normative pluralism’ may constitute a major source of conflict. It is a central objective of the actors involved in a governance process to assert their preferred norms regarding the issues at stake, about who will have the right or the legitimacy to formulate them, and about which norms will determine how the rules of the game are defined between the actors. Norms therefore constitute key stakes in themselves. They are a major source of competition between actors and in power games.

Building on Krasner (1982), Searle (1995), Katzenstein (1996), and Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), norms can be differentiated into three types, each of which involves a different level of analysis:

1. 'Meta-norms' refer to principles that guide values in societies, such as sustainable development, gender equality, participation, etc.
2. 'Constitutive norms' refer to the organisational or institutional mechanisms related to the operations of the issue under analysis, such as the statutes of the United Nations Environment Programme or the norms concerning chieftainship in a tribal society. They define the actor and give it its identity.
3. 'Regulatory norms', or rules, delimitate the conduct of individuals and groups: they specify what is appropriate or inappropriate in terms of behaviour, indicate what each person must / must not or can / cannot do, and state positive (approval or reward) or negative (disapproval or punishment) sanctions.

For analytical purposes, norms may be seen as having life cycles composed of different phases. They can be formulated at various levels ('norm emergence'; see Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) and transferred to others ('norm cascade'). At each level, there is a process of reaction: rejection, resistance, internalisation, or adaptation. As a way of developing this approach further, much work has been done on the interconnection of different analytical levels through scales, in geography (Bulkeley 2005), political science (Young 2002), and political ecology (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987).

The processes of change in social norms can be analysed using a very simple matrix (Figure 1), which employs a scalar (or 'multi-level') perspective to illustrate the division of phases and levels in norms, from their emergence to any reactions. According to research needs and contexts, further levels could be added (regions, villages, sub-continent, etc.). It should also be noted that there is no bias regarding the level where norms are formulated: this can be done at any level. The arrows express the idea that whenever a norm is transmitted, there is a reaction and a return of information to the transmission mechanism (feedback). A large part of governance processes takes place between actors at different levels, but they can also involve interactions within a level. This idea is captured by Young's (2002) concept of vertical and horizontal interplay.

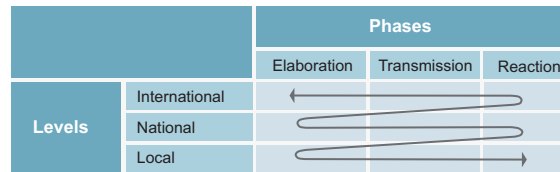


Fig. 1
Scalar analysis of
norms.

20.3.3 Differentiating actors

The GAF is a methodology centred on actors⁷. Social norms are obviously carried by individual and collective actors, linked to their conduct and interactions, and conditioned by their nature, power, interests, ideas, and history. Different tools are available to analyse actors and their interactions, for example ‘stakeholder analysis’ (see, e.g., ODA 1995; World Bank 1996; Golder and Gawler 2005; Mayers 2005; Mayers and Vermeulen 2005). These tools usually include a system of description and analysis adapted to the needs of different types of investigation.

Identification and description of actors: The first step is to identify the stakeholders and decide on how to describe them. A major difference compared with some other methodologies is that all actors are to be included in a GAF analysis without prejudice, regardless of whether they have ‘formal’ or ‘informal’ status (i.e. are recognised by the authorities or not). Previous analyses frequently neglected poor people, indigenous peoples, and women (Chambers 1983). In a GAF analysis, by contrast, the most relevant actors have to be identified and described no matter what their status is.

Assessment of actors’ influence: The second step is based on the idea that not all actors have the same influence in a governance process. Many tools thus propose to categorise them according to their influence. The difficult question is how to assess influence. It is proposed here to conduct a situational analysis of their relative power based on Bourdieu’s theory of social fields (1980). In synthesis, ‘symbolic capital’ is the prestige an actor enjoys, ‘economic capital’ is revenue or properties (not necessarily expressed in monetary terms), ‘social capital’ is the social network an actor can mobilise, and ‘cultural capital’ is the knowledge to be drawn on. They are interlinked and form a first variable determining an individual’s position in a social field. The second variable is the individual’s will and capacity to mobilise

these resources; the third one is the effective mobilisation of these resources in the governance process; and the last one is strategic interaction with other actors. Two dimensions of these variables must be considered in an empirical evaluation: the objective dimension, which can be measured (e.g. the resources actors have at their disposal), and the subjective dimension, which depends on the perception of others.

Actors can then be classified according to their influence and power. To keep things simple, it is recommended to classify actors into three categories according to the above four variables: ‘strategic’, ‘relevant’, and ‘secondary’. Prats (2001, p 120) defines *strategic actors* as “any individual, organisation or group with sufficient power resources to hinder or disturb the functioning of the rules or procedures for decision-making and resolution of collective conflicts”. *Relevant actors* are those who form part of the institutional fabric and have the necessary resources to be considered as strategic, but who do not use these resources or are dominated by others in the process. *Secondary actors* do not have sufficient power to change the rules of the game, or remain passive. It makes sense to concentrate first and foremost on the strategic actors. If the necessary resources are available to the researcher, the relevant and secondary actors can be included as well.

Categorisation of interaction between actors: As a third step, the nature of the interactions between actors can be categorised, according to classic institutional economics (Commons 1934) and social anthropology (Mauss 1923–1924), into three types:

- ‘Negotiation transactions’, in which power is equally distributed. The transaction relationship created depends on the bargaining power of each of the actors present.
- ‘Directive transactions’, in which power is unequal, as in an employer–employee or patron–client relationship, whether or not guaranteed by a third party such as a political authority.
- ‘Reciprocity transactions’, which correspond to Mauss’s (1923–1924) ‘gifts and counter-gifts’ and constitute a system of moral debt and reciprocity, but also of reinforcement of social relationships. Networks are a particular type of reciprocity interaction.

Various combinations of these three types of interaction correspond to different types of relationship, such as clientelism, commerce, family, etc. These interactions have to be specified in theoretical terms, based on observations in the field. There are different tools for the representation and analysis of actors' interactions, such as, for instance, actors mapping (Turnpenny et al 2005).

20.3.4 Investigating nodal points

In a governance process, actors interact repeatedly. These interactions take place physically or through different media (e.g. Internet, telephone). In the GAF, such places of interaction are called nodal points (NPs) and defined as physical or virtual spaces where various problems, actors, and processes converge, and where decisions are taken, agreements concluded, and social norms created (e.g. a negotiating table or a local community assembly). They are an interesting starting point for the observation of governance processes. This concept of nodal points (Figure 2) has much in common with, but is nevertheless quite different from, 'social interfaces' (Long 2001) or *arènes* (Olivier de Sardan 1995).

The GAF aims to distinguish the formal and informal nodal points that form part of the fabric of decision-making spaces. The identification and characterisation of different nodal points and their relationships as well as their effects on the problem observed (dependent variable) provides a basis for analysing the existing conditions, and whether they are favourable or unfavourable to a process of change. Nodal points are directly linked to actors and processes.

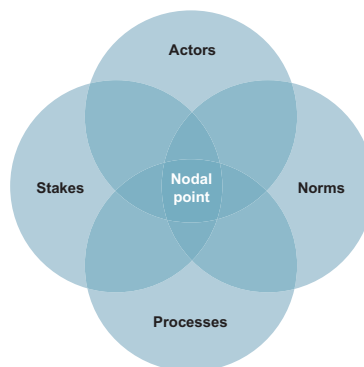
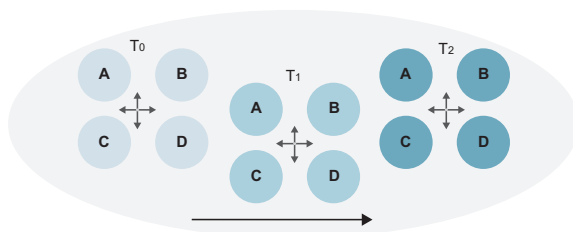


Fig. 2
A nodal point.

20.3.5 Analysing processes

Processes result from actors' interactions in nodal points (NPs) over time; they introduce a historical dimension to the methodology. For the purpose of analysis, processes can be sequenced into situations or moments which can be compared in time to understand the direction in which they evolve (the pattern of evolution), as well as to identify factors favourable or unfavourable to change. This idea is illustrated in Figure 3. Four actors (A, B, C, and D) interact repeatedly in time (T_0 , T_1 , T_2); for example, they have met at the negotiation table three times over a one-year period. The 'problem' is delimited by the line that circles the process. It has a starting point (first appearance of the problem under study) and an end (a decision is made that resolves it). This is, admittedly, an ideal situation, since processes of governance are rarely linear – they pass through phases of blocking, negotiation, and adjustment – and their beginning or conclusion may have to be artificially delimited, so their boundaries might not be as clear-cut as in this example.

Fig. 3
A governance
process.



A concrete example for the nodal point shown in Figure 3 would be a table of negotiation at which a trade union, an industry, the government, and a mediator come together over wages. It could also be developers, the state, a local community, and cattle herders exchanging their views concerning a development project, or parties negotiating to put an end to a civil war, etc. These processes obviously entail complex interactions within a given context and history, and also, as stated above, an encounter of different 'universes of meaning', world visions, cultures, discourses, and strategies. The identification of a nodal point is an ideal first step towards the observation of a governance process. A negotiation table is easy in this respect, but the process may also be informal and hidden, making direct observation difficult. The solution in this case would be an *ex post facto* reconstitution on the basis of interviews with participants and documentary observation.

A nodal point can itself be composed of several levels, which can each be analysed as a nodal point (a ‘nodal chain’). In the example of negotiations concerning a wage increase in an industrial sector, representatives of unions (A), employers (B), and the government (C), along with a mediator (D) are present in a nodal point. But the unions’ representative has been delegated by several unions (A_1, A_2, A_3) that had to define a common position in preparation for the negotiation process, and each union (e.g. A_1) is present in several factories which also had to define a common position ($A_{11}, A_{12}, \dots, A_{15}$). The situation would be similar with the employers or the different ministries. As illustrated in Figure 4, this constitutes a chain of nodal points (or a nodal chain).

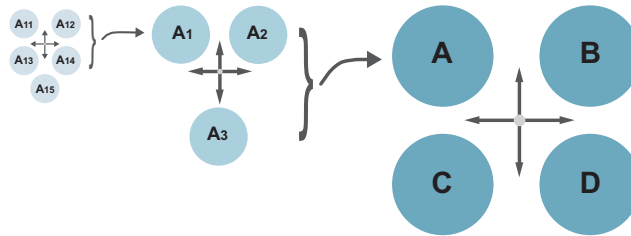


Fig. 4
Chain of nodal points.

Any set of interactions (formal or informal) between several actors that produces social norms (and institutions) can be considered as a NP. The starting point (the selected NP) for the research project can be at any level, depending on the purpose of the research. To understand how the unions managed to define a common position requires following the chain and studying several nodal points. At each level, there is confrontation between different viewpoints. This process of confrontation is partly constitutive of the actors’ identities. When building a common position, actors have to make strategic moves and accept compromises, but over time they may increasingly identify with this common position, even if it was not their first choice in the beginning.

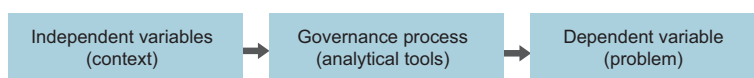
20.4 Examples of how the GAF can be operationalised

From the point of view of operability, the GAF has been developed as a tool for analysing concrete problems, as defined in section 20.3.1 above, with a view to contributing to their solution. A basic requirement is that the problem and issues at stake can be studied using the GAF, typically to describe

and analyse a governance process, as defined above. However, the GAF is not suitable for guiding the choice between different systems of values or ethics, and it cannot answer questions such as “What is the best political system?”.

As shown by concrete examples under study (Álvarez et al 2008; Báscolo 2010), the GAF can be used to understand issues of divergence between laws and the actual situation, such as inequity in access to health services despite equitable access being legally guaranteed, or deforestation in an indigenous territory despite the area being protected. In these examples, the problem to be understood is the dependent variable. It is assumed that there is a direct causal link between the dependent variable and the governance process under study (e.g. the governance of a regional health system or of the indigenous territory). The way in which the rules and norms are decided upon and implemented is causal. Understanding this process can, therefore, facilitate the resolution of the problem under study. At the same time, the governance process is itself determined by a context, such as, for example, a historical process of marginalisation of urban poor or indigenous people and a political system that reflects this history. Therefore, the governance process is itself part of a causal chain where it is being determined by a larger process while influencing a dependent variable (see Figure 5). In other words, it produces effects on a dependent variable (e.g. access to health services),⁸ yet it is also affected by independent variables (e.g. the institutional organisation of the health system, social class structure, or religious beliefs).

Fig. 5
Causal chain.



Based on the five categories of analysis, the GAF methodology aims to identify the way in which governance influences the chosen dependent variable, thereby enhancing the understanding of a problem. In addition, it might also be helpful to identify features of the nodal points that are favourable or unfavourable towards effectively addressing the problem under study and achieving social change.

Figure 6 illustrates a simplified example in which governance is an intermediate variable. The governance process in this case involved different nodal points: decision-making bodies where decisions were being made that influ-

enced each other to create the problem under study, namely unequal access to abortion (i.e. health services) in different provinces of Argentina, which resulted in higher mortality rates caused by clandestine abortions in certain provinces.⁹ Analysis of the governance process helped to identify a specific nodal point as central in the problem: the board responsible for elaborating the hospital abortion policy, represented as Node C in Figure 6. A key determinant (independent variable) was the fragmentation of the decision-making process between different levels (federal, provincial, municipal), allowing certain key actors (the physicians in municipal hospitals) to decide, according to their beliefs or ideology, on whether or not to adhere to the federal provisions on abortion. (According to these provisions, abortion is authorised in some cases – if the pregnancy is the result of rape or if the mother’s life is in danger – but in other cases depends on a medical evaluation.) Basically, wealthy women who wanted to have an abortion chose to avoid the restrictive provincial medical systems and go to private clinics, while poor women were faced with the options of carrying an unwanted child or going underground for an abortion with high health risks. In this example, an analysis of the governance process using the GAF led to a better understanding of these dynamics.

Moving from analysis towards intervention, the interaction between fragmentation of the decision-making process (key independent variable) and Node C would be a good place to start a more in-depth analysis and subsequently launch an intervention with a view to improving maternal health. This intervention could be aimed, for example, at resolving the fragmentation issue and establishing and enforcing clear, generalised rules.

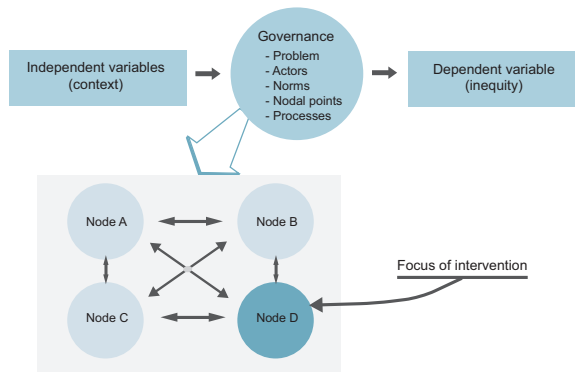


Fig. 6
Intervention
methodology.

20.5 Assessment and conclusion

It is the fate of some concepts to remain semantically fuzzy, especially in the social sciences. Such concepts fulfil an essential function, because their polysemia allows a ‘productive misunderstanding’ (Bohannan 1958), a situation where a host of actors, each with their own interest and logic, are involved in a common social action (Sahlins 1985). Based precisely on their lack of precision, these concepts make it possible to reach a tactical consensus between people with opposite ideas: “using a neutralised language is essential whenever there is a need for establishing a practical consensus between agents or groups of agents with different interests” (Bourdieu 1982, p 64). Such politico-strategic uses are one reason why it is difficult to ‘stabilise’ and cumulate knowledge in the social sciences.

Among various frameworks developed for the study of non-hierarchical coordination systems (discussed in Hufty 2011, in this volume), the GAF stands alone in fulfilling several criteria that seem fundamental for the operationalisation of the concept of governance and the development of a relevant methodology: being realistic (non-normative), interdisciplinary, reflexive, comparative, generalisable, and operational. The proposed definition of governance facilitates the understanding of what is and what is not governance, and its empirical observation.

The Governance Analytical Framework contributes to giving governance its due place in scientific research. It is a realistic methodology for investigating governance processes, meaning the social interactions in which actors make decisions regarding collective problems and issues, thereby creating, reinforcing, or changing social norms and institutions. The five tools that are proposed here – problems, actors, social norms, processes, and nodal points – and that make the GAF a coherent methodology, have been used and further developed in studies on access to public health (Báscolo 2008), urban security (Velásquez 2007; López Cuartas 2008), product chains (Tobasura and Ospina 2010), post-conflict water supply (Humbel 2009), biodiversity conservation (Hufty 2008, 2009; Bottazzi 2009; Imesch 2009; Bukobero 2010; Diaz 2010), biopiracy (Gómez Lee 2008), AIDS in South Africa (Thélot 2007), discourse analysis (Scoville-Simonds 2009), and deforestation (Jean-Maurice 2009). The GAF has been applied by researchers from different disciplines, mainly to analyse – in the Cartesian sense of dividing each difficulty into as many parts as is feasible and necessary to resolve it (Descartes 1637) – governance processes which the researcher is seeking

to understand better rather than applying a predefined solution. It proved to be especially suitable for addressing complex situations, as it facilitates the delimitation of the case study in time and space by identifying nodal points and by systematically subdividing complexity into manageable parts. The GAF methodology obviously builds upon, and incorporates, previous works from several disciplines (political science, anthropology, law, geography, economics, etc.) and approaches (e.g. constructivism, post-structuralism, critical realism, etc.), which makes it sound familiar and quite easy to grasp. This is intended to be so. But it can also be used at higher levels of theoretical complexity. The methodology is still young, its possibilities and limits will be tested in the future, but its widening use confirms that there is a need and a space in the social sciences and in sustainable development research for such a methodology.

To conclude, this model is hoped to represent an improvement upon earlier versions. It is certainly an attempt to transform a rather vague and often contradictory concept into an empirical methodology with rigorous criteria. However, it should still be considered as a work in progress.

Endnotes

Full citation for this article:

Hufty M. 2011. Investigating policy processes: The Governance Analytical Framework (GAF). *In*: Wiesmann U, Hurni H, editors; with an international group of co-editors. *Research for Sustainable Development: Foundations, Experiences, and Perspectives*. Perspectives of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South, University of Bern, Vol. 6. Bern, Switzerland: Geographica Bernensia, pp 403–424.

Acknowledgements:

The author acknowledges support from the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South: Research Partnerships for Mitigating Syndromes of Global Change, co-funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and the participating institutions. Many colleagues and research partners have contributed to this project. The author is grateful for inputs in particular from E. Báscolo, O. Battistini, R. Bazzani, P. Bottazzi, S. Carengo, S. Cavaliere, C. Cross, L. Diaz, M. de la Fuente, M. Galvin, S. Hoffmann, L. Lacroix, F. Mayorga, I. Milbert, M. Modoux, F. Muttenter, F. Nathan, A. Roig, L. Rosales, A. Wilkis, and N. Yavich. Special thanks go to M. Flandreau, M. Scoville-Simonds, C. Ott, and S. Rist. Although this is in many respects the result of a collective undertaking, the author assumes full responsibility for any remaining flaws.

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² Promoted by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

³ "Governance: Towards a Conceptual Framework", held on 22–24 November 2007. The symposium was funded by the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South, the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAHS), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and REGIMEN – a Research Network on International Governance, Globalisation, and the Transformations of the State.

⁴ Technically, this amounts to a 'narrow interdisciplinarity' limited to social and human sciences, but it could easily be expanded to include life or natural sciences, as in political ecology, for example.

⁵ A principle developed as early as 1927 by Heisenberg in physics (the uncertainty principle), in 1967 by Devereux in ethnology, and in 2001 by Bourdieu in sociology.

⁶ Social institutions such as kinship or property should not be confused with organisations, which are certainly based on institutions but also have formal characteristics such as staff, a hierarchy, division of labour, resources, a recognised structure, and an overall purpose.

⁷ There are some slight differences between the terms "stakeholders" (individuals or groups with an interest in the outcome of the governance process; the term is more common in the technical world), "actors" (active participants in the governance process; more common in the social sciences), and "agents" (those with agency, i.e. the capacity to act and make choices). I am using "stakeholders" and "actors" rather indiscriminately, as all actors are stakeholders. I do not use the more divisive term "agents" here to avoid confusion.

⁸ As a caveat, it has to be said that the governance process probably represents only one of various factors (multi-causality), which contributes to explaining the problem being studied, but cannot explain all of it. The explanatory power of this model, or any model, should therefore not be overestimated.

⁹ I wish to thank my colleagues E. Báscolo and N. Yavich at the Instituto de la Salud Juan Lazarte in Rosario, Argentina, for this example, which I have simplified for the purpose of the present article.

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