Chapter 4: Evolutionary Paths

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Abstract: In this chapter we discuss the concept of governance paths and the forms of dependency marking paths. The forms of dependency constitute rigidities in governance evolution, but leave space for flexibility, for path creation.

4.1   Governance paths

The specific evolution of governance in a community is referred to with the concept of a path. We already prepared this concept in the previous chapter, where we discussed elements and driving forces. Actors, institutions and expertise co- evolve in a governance evolution (Van Assche, Beunen, et al., 2011; North, 2005; Van Assche & Djanibekov, 2012). They form each other and are formed in and by governance processes. We now add that governance paths cross *sites* and display *mechanisms.* Sites are places and occasions of higher communicative density. They refer to times and places when and where decisions are taken or prepared, where within or between actors alternative courses of collective action are assessed. Mechanisms is a broad concept that includes institutions (as coordination mechanisms), mechanisms of object formation (see below) and stratagems, or individual actor's devices to influence the game. The inclusion of new actors can shift the path, can introduce new mechanisms into the game, which in return can be emulated by other actors.

Governance in modern society is multi- level governance, which means that several paths exist in a (larger) community. These paths can run parallel, they can entangle, and they can block each other. Evolutions in one path can affect the other paths, both positively and negatively, by inspiring conformity or by inspiring deviation. Actors can participate in several paths and certain sites can be shared by different paths. A reception after a concert for example can be visited by local and regional politicians, members of the regional arts council and their major corporate donors, therewith creating a site that brings different paths together.

4.2 Dependencies

Actors in a governance path, in a given configuration of institutions, cannot freely change the course of governance. The path is subject to dependencies. We distinguish path dependence, interdependence and goal dependence (Shtaltovna, Van Assche, & Hornidge, 2013; Van Assche, Beunen, et al., 2011).

Path dependence refers to legacies from the past that impact the course of governance (Van Assche, Beunen, et al., 2011; North, 2005; cf. Callon, 1991). The concept of path-dependence was first theorized under that name in political science in the early eighties (see North, 2005 for an overview; also Eggertsson, 1990, 2005; Avid, 2007), while the phenomena referred to were already observed and theorized in anthropology and history (Claude L evi- Strauss, Mary Douglas, Edmund Leach, Fernand Braudel and others). Institutional economics and policy studies adopted it from political science (e.g. Ostrom, 1990; North, 1990; Eggertsson, 1990), and more recently urban planning picked up the idea (e.g. Healey, 2006).

Different definitions can be found in the literature, all referring to 'history matters', by restricting the options available in decision- making (North, 2005; Whitehead, 2002). Path dependencies can be manifold, and have to be distinguished empirically. Path dependencies can reside in the presence of certain actors (and their conservative views or strategies), the presence of certain formal institutions (restraining change), informal institutions (in the guise of traditions, or traditional ways to deal with formal institutions), and, in some societies, dead institutions. The latter can be described as passive path dependencies, with the capacity of dragging the path towards an older course, without being able to replicate exactly that older course. Path dependencies can also be located in a specific dialectics between formal and informal institutions, and between actors and institutions. If certain formal rules are informally linked to the identity of the community, they are likely to remain respected and guide governance in a certain direction. If a new coalition of actors enters, that same association between rule and (rejected) identity can inspire a conspicuous breaking of the rule, or a strong effort to change it. Furthermore power relations, legitimation procedures, organizational and larger cultures, as shared understandings of the situation can all be seen as legacies of the past that influence governance paths (Foucault, 2003; Scott, 1998).

Interdependence is in a first sense interdependence between actors in a governance process, but also the relations between the different institutions and between actors and institutions can be conceptualised as interdependencies. Each step on a governance path is conditioned, not only by the previous steps, but also by the pattern of actors and institutions that evolved over time. Once environmentalists enter local governance, the strategizing of merchants will have to take into account their presence. Besides blocking or complementing each other's strategies, actors over time can develop other roles, linked to specific contributions to accepted common goods. The local environmentalists can be a pain for the local merchants, but after a while a clean and green environment can be considered an acceptable common good by the chamber of commerce, partly because it brings in some residents and visitors, partly because it turns out less expensive

than feared. The green faction in city council meetings can then be expected to play its green role by the other actors. So, interdependence is relevant for actors in strategizing towards their own goals, and in furthering common goals.

At a larger scale, the coupling between function systems adds a layer of interdependence in governance. The potential next step and the effects of that step are co- determined by the pattern of structural couplings between function systems. The relative position of each function system in a society, versus the other systems influence the way in which communications in that system gain effect in that society. In a society where the legal system is subordinate to the political system it might not be useful to resort to the courts in case certain political actors break the law in their political strategizing. If markets are very free and citizens are seen first of all as bearers of property rights, local governance will be less likely to come up with spatial plans to further certain common goods (Van Assche, Beunen, Duineveld, & De Jong, 2013). If local laws are easily shot down by regional courts, then local governance can develop in the direction of formal passivity and increasing reliance on informal coordination.

*Goal dependenc*e, finally, is dependence on the future, or, in other terms, the influence of shared visions or plans on changes in the actor/ institution configuration. Goal dependence can be likened to Aristotle's idea of the *causa finalis*, final cause. It does not mean that the future magically determines the present. Rather it implies that certain shared visions of the future and their presence in institutions, such as plans and policies, and in the discursive worlds of actors and the community at large has real effects. Explaining the evolution of actor/ institution configurations in many communities is hardly possible without mentioning the influence of visions, from concrete plans to the vaguest of hopes, whether actors or communities are aware of them or not. Hopes can be interpreted as realities, visions can be confused with existing situations, what ought to be can perfuse what is. Goal dependence becomes especially relevant when politics is more than coordination, when visions of the future are formed and translated into policies. Each governance path will be different and unique in its combination of path dependencies, interdependencies and goal dependencies. Each form of dependence can be considered an aspect of the *rigidity* of governance paths. Yet their interplay also creates *flexibility.* This can be better understood if we bring back a few notions introduced earlier. Interdependence between actors in most cases is interdependence between organizations (with individuals representing organizations), and these are not fully transparent to each other, even when there are no stratagems at play. This means that there will be a difference between actual and perceived interdependence, and between the perceptions of interdependence on different sides. Coordinated strategies acknowledging this interdependence are thus likely to produce unanticipated effects. Path dependence, is generally even more elusive for the actors themselves, as it involves images of the past, images that are necessarily constructed in the present (Teampau & Van Assche, 2007). Many actors will not be aware of structural path dependencies, and if so, they will, in asserting their autonomy towards them, operate on the basis of imperfect images of self and past. Actions inspired by interpretations of path dependency are

therefore likely to have unanticipated effects which, in turn, modify the pattern of path dependence. Regarding goal dependence, one can say that the unanticipated effects here are most significant, since one deals with images of futures that are utterly unknowable and steering attempts to bring that future closer that are, in a systems perspective, bound to hit the wall of other autopoietic systems, opaque and unwilling to be steered from outside. We enter the old discussion on 'implementation' here, with implementation often reduced in bureaucratic discourse to one final step of policy making or planning, while in reality, the policy or plan itself has no magical power to reshaping reality (Beunen & Duineveld, 2010; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1979). It only has effects insofar as existing actors incorporate it in their future interactions, which will be subjected to powers and interpretations not foreseeable in the present.

4.3 Path creation

The way each dependency plays out in a governance situation simultaneously paves the way for its slow modification. The three dependencies interact and therewith the level of uncertainty and the importance of unanticipated consequences increases. Goal dependencies will interact with path dependencies and interdependencies. Furthering goals is only possible building on the interdependent web of actors and institutions and cannot avoid probably hardly understood path dependencies. Patterns of interdependence are affected by plans for the future and the way they affect path dependence. Path dependencies will affect the implementation of plans, yet these plans can have effects that modify the pattern of interdependence, which might resolve some aspects of path dependency. Shifts in actor/institution configurations can be explained by the interactions between the three dependencies, but not entirely. *Path creation* is possible, and is partly the result of spaces for contingency, freedom, built into the governance system. Partly it also emerges out of the interactions between the dependencies, where there are always unanticipated consequences. Understanding dependencies and path creation, rigidity and flexibility, is helpful in the understanding of steering, planning and their limitations. Actors, institutions and expertise can contribute to changes in the path, but none in separation.

This being said, interdependence does emerge as the basic condition for the reproduction of governance. Path dependence and goal dependence have to be understood against this background. It is in the necessary interplay between actors, between actors and institutions, and between formal and informal institutions, that every next step in a governance path is set, that path dependencies receive their substance, and that the visions of the future have an impact in the present.

In the next chapter, we investigate the implications of our perspective on governance paths and their dependencies for the construction of subjects and objects in governance, the inclusion of subjects and objects in policies and plans and the implementation of such new formalities.

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