

operation countries illuminates that policy-makers themselves often perceive the decisions to be based on rational and strategic choices (ch. 8, 9).

## 6.2 Following a beaten track: Discourse reproduction

As chapter 6.1 shows, within the thematic departments, plenty of spaces for agency exist that might enable a deviation from previous discourse or lead to a repetition of discursive assumptions in view of cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies. The head of units' autonomy as well as decision-making capacity would theoretically enable them to make far-reaching decisions about a change of directions. Nevertheless, although there is room for agency, it is not seized regularly.

While some elements of the policy discourse's dispositive, such as the rules for decision making, have an enabling function and open a space of agency, other elements of the dispositive rather restrict policy options and make repetition more likely than change. Even if they are endowed with official decision-making power, actors in the BMBF are surrounded by the infrastructural elements that stabilize discourse. Practices, norms, rules, the accepted body of knowledge embodied in strategies delimit their options.

The underlying structures of the BMBF, its organisation into thematic departments and a separate international one, endowed with financial resources according to specific distributional schemes, the laws and regulations which empower ministerial heads of unit to make decisions, as well as the contents of policy discourse embodied in policy documents may be interpreted as an institutional context or a *historical a priori*, as *conditions of possibility* (Foucault 1972a) for the specific policy discourse on cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies in sustainability research.

Foucault distinguishes between the dispositive and the historical a priori by highlighting the dispositive's strategic aims of intervening (Foucault 1980c), while Keller argues that the dispositive is equally aimed at providing an "infrastructure of discourse production" (Keller 2005: [10]). In view of the stabilizing function for discourse, dispositives are related to the notion of path dependency, which describes that established paths become more likely to be trotted on again. Once a certain direction (of a decision, organisational structure, technology) is taken, structural or discursive innovation becomes unlikely, as recursive processes positively reinforce the initial direction: Paths once taken narrow down room for alternatives and limit opportunities of action. History thus inscribes itself in the organisation and its shape. Beyond shaping options and constraints of action, historical pathways

grown into structures also shape an institution's preferences (Stucke 1993; Wilsford 1994; Van der Meulen 1998; Greener 2002; Kay 2005; Leach et al. 2010)<sup>2</sup>.

Most institutional structures as well as practices in BMBF policy existed prior to the discourse on cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies, and additionally also pertain to further policy discourses. This would classify them as institutions of a historical *a priori*, which I demonstrate to be the BMBF's *core discourse* (ch. 8). However, the institutions and structures also maintain a specific order of power and knowledge that is both relevant to the core discourse as well as the discourse on cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies. They guide the production of the core discourse as well as the production of the specific discourse on cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies in sustainability research: This would classify them as a dispositive according to Keller. In view of the internal (power) effects on discourse (re)production, I will refer to the different elements as dispositive, even though the line between the two concepts of the *a priori* and the dispositive is blurred in case of the institutional structures, institutions, norms, rules, practices and policy ideas of the BMBF.

Being surrounded by a dispositive means that policy makers cannot freely pick out whichever argument they deem suitable in a specific situation to actualize the policy discourse. Although actors possess a degree of agency to choose a certain discursive direction over another, the dispositive delimits their options of what can be adequately chosen as a policy content at a certain point in time. Of course, actors pick up new research topics regularly – they do not repeat the same themes over and over. However, in doing so they stay within the boundaries of the discourse as a system of dispersion (Foucault 1972a).

### 6.2.1 Practices

To understand why BMBF policies for cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies in sustainability research generally follow previous lines of thematic policy discourse despite of the large room for agency and contingency as element of discourse, it is necessary to consider the interdependence of different strategic levels once again. As described in chapter 6.1, strategies and programmes are officially designed to function as guide of future activities. However, they often use past funding initiatives and past strategies as building blocks and thereby also

---

2 From a political economy angle, path dependency can be explained by the high costs of institutional change compared to options of adjusting policies to existing institutions and structures. The concept of path dependency thus helps to understand the stability of institutions and their continuity, as it stresses the impact of structures over the agency of actors to change (Stucke 1993; Wilsford 1994; Van der Meulen 1998; Greener 2002; Kay 2005; Leach et al. 2010).

have to be considered as a consequence of past ideas – as a strong element of discourse reproduction:

“Directives from above emerge in an iterative process, by looking at what the units are doing, and then putting that together. And that’s the link with strategy. Which in turn is constitutive of the elements it developed from. You see the loop. If I was commissioned to write an internationalisation strategy for the ministry, I wouldn’t start by asking what makes sense and how do we get there, what do BMZ and AA say, what can we learn from a programme evaluation and then write a strategic and binding guideline. Instead, someone tours through the units asking them to write down what they are doing already. And everybody contributes perfect arguments for the own previous practice, and I have to make sense of that. That’s how strategies work in the BMBF. They are less directing future actions than summaries of the status quo.” (PT01)

Strategies thus have a legitimating function of pre-existing activities and repeat the status quo while guiding the future. A different interviewee similarly states regarding the emergence of FONA:

“You look at what you’re doing already. Environmental research existed beforehand, in a subdepartment that dealt with the technological questions of environmental research. Thus, a basis existed already and considered how to align that with the new requirements, so we could say: This is our contribution. And that’s how FONA emerged.” (PA14)

The quote pictures that the strategic orientation of the first FONA editions equally drew on activities that in their majority existed previously, which another interviewee purported about the Action Plan for International Cooperation in the International Department: “Most projects included in the Action Plan were already running. Projects stemmed from the entire ministry. The thematic departments reported those projects to us that seemed to be highly structure-forming” (PA09). Indeed, the Action Plan itself centres on so-called *beacons* of past and ongoing funding, which are considered as exemplary for the objectives and mode of future activities, as models in view of their impact, or exemplify the embeddedness into higher strategic goals (BMBF 2014e: 54).

Looking at previous funding activities in order to inspire future strategies can be considered as a routine practice of discourse re-iteration within the ministry. In addition, the phenomenon of *voluntary repetition* contributes to the stability of the policy discourse. In contrast to ideas of the policy cycle (ch. 3), which assume a circle of rational decisions based on learning and adaptation, the main policy discourse in the BMBF is not renewed in circular processes, but self-repeating: Strategies guide actions, but actions at the same time guide strategies: most funding initiatives conceptually draw on strategies as a legitimization, considering them a

safe space, instead of suggesting novel approaches – which might be rejected. Staff of the project management agencies who were involved in new funding initiatives commented on the influence of thematic programmes on funding initiatives (interview with PT07).

The ideas, objectives and motivations expressed in specific calls for funding thus mostly correspond to the thematic programme of the respective department and to the High-tech Strategy as the leitmotif of BMBF, sometimes even additionally drawing on the Internationalisation Strategy – which thereby receives a reason for existence beyond the International Department. Those BMBF departments willing to cooperate internationally can draw upon the Internationalisation Strategy as a *pool of accepted arguments* in order to plausibly legitimize their international co-operation activities. The Internationalisation Strategy thus mainly functions as a repertoire of ideas rather than as a structural dispositive for discourse production.

The call for proposals of the CLIENT initiative, for example states that it aims to contribute to fulfilling the “the Federal Government’s High-Tech Strategy, the Environmental Technologies Master Plan, and the Internationalisation Strategy” (BMBF 2010b); while the call for proposals on Sustainable Land Management explicitly is put into the context of FONA, the High-tech Strategy as well as the High-tech Strategy on Climate (BMBF 2008b). In case of the calls for proposals for the IWRM and Megacities funding initiatives, neither FONA nor High-Tech Strategy are references, as both emerged before the framing strategies. Nevertheless, both were put into the context of FONA later (ch. 5, 8, 9).

If actions guide strategies and these guide actions in a self-referential manner, a continuation of old paths is more likely than change of directions. One interviewee pointedly wraps it up: “Strategies are self-fulfilling prophecies. The cart is put before the horse.” (PA14) The self-referential practice of policy making thus continually narrows the space of changing the underlying discourse, as it cements the basic policy direction. Discourses are self-reinforcing phenomena, which essentially make the repetition more likely than change. As has been observed in other policy fields, established ideas in policy discourse are persisting and permeating, and actors defend them against change in order to protect the inner logic of the world view (and thereby stabilizing the own position) (Hofmann 1993).

## 6.2.2 Organisational identity and the role of strategies

Next to the self-referential practices of policy making, the prevalent discourse of science policy for cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies is maintained through an organisational dispositive. Responsibilities are formally distributed to specific working units, which are responsible for and therefore thematically match the strategies. As such, the foci of the working units in the Sustainability Subdepartment correspond to the thematic foci of FONA. When introduced

as a new concept, some administrative reorganisation was done in order to adjust the organisational shape with the strategy for the first edition of FONA. According to interviewees, as of the second edition of FONA, the programme was continued in a way to fit the administrative structures of the BMBF (interview with PA14). The example illustrates that programmes and strategies interlink the contents of policy with the organisational and administrative structures and staff. As actors have an interest in institutional survival (Weingart 2006), discursive change is becoming unlikely through the structural embedding.

Programmes and strategies also play a role in maintaining the institutional status quo. Partly due to the efforts to set itself off from other ministries (ch. 7), the BMBF strongly strives for a both an internally coherent as well as externally visible umbrella for its activities and initiatives. Subsuming past and previous actions within a strategy or a programme is one strategy of providing both, as illustrated in the following quote on the Internationalisation Action Plan:

“The programme is part of a larger initiative led by Schavan, aimed at creating framework programmes in the ministry. In the Minister’s view, the variety of projects in the BMBF was too large and there weren’t enough concentrated, publicly visible activities. In 2008 or 2009, it was therefore decided to draft framework programmes. The International Department decided to write the Internationalisation Action Plan in order to become more prominent within the BMBF. And to operationalize and concretize the Internationalisation Strategy on a programme level.” (PA09)

Strategies are therefore not neutral documents of a policy direction, but also fulfil a further political function. The efforts of blending in and harmonizing actions exemplify the ministry’s desire for concentrated, focused, targeted actions, which provide visibility and legitimacy for its policy, thereby defending its boundaries and responsibilities on the political as well as administrative level. In addition to strategic umbrellas, visibility is also provided by extensive dissemination efforts for funding initiatives as well as through large scale conferences in representative locations (field notes, July 2012 – September 2013), which seem to be directed at influencing public perceptions and attributing importance through the large format. In view of the final Megacities conference in May 2013, a member of the advisory board notes that “[a] Ministry, too, needs visibility and public representation. This is related to accountability as well. EUR 50 million were spent on the programme. You have to be able to externally legitimize that” (EE06). Similarly, the ministry encourages and demands public dissemination efforts of the funded projects, such as brochures, films, posters etc. These are mainly directed at German public rather than to the public in cooperation countries (interviews with PP3, PP4). Many dissemination efforts are thus means of providing legitimacy, accountability and vis-

ibility in view of German taxpayers or political players rather than being aimed at capacity building within partner countries.

As discourse-related practices, these efforts of discourse reproduction are much more common than model practices in the context of science policy for cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies. The lack of empirically observable model practices can be easily explained by the distinct groups of actors as producers and recipients of discourse: Across groups of different actors with distinct practices – such as working routines within a ministry vs. standardized types of knowledge generation in science – model practices necessarily play a small role. Practices within the policy making sphere do not apply, and thus cannot serve as a model for practices in other social spheres.

### 6.3 Policy makers as change agents

Heads of unit often could, but rather don't change the discourse – policy continuation is more likely than policy change. Nevertheless, the BMBF is not a static system, as becomes evident through developments such as the introduction of new concepts like sustainability as a guiding frame for environmental research (ch. 8.2) or coming up with innovative funding initiatives such as the African RSSCs. In some cases, actors have used and even stretched the room for agency.

Considering international cooperation, the BMBF for a long time maintained the principle of “no exchange of funds”.<sup>3</sup> BMBF staff commonly assumed that bureaucratic rules of project funding prohibited new formats of cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies, in which international partners would receive a cofunding as well. Many interviewees repeated this position without questioning it. Deeply internalized, they took this as an official rule or law and did not stop to question it. And indeed, the legal frame of research funding in Germany is rather adjusted to fund national research than at international cooperation.

Nevertheless, in some cases, the initiators of funding initiatives were willing to scrutinize the rules in order to change the discourse and its assumptions through novel approaches, innovative modes of funding etc. In the Megacities initiative, for example, international partners were funded to a certain extent, despite the general allegations that this was not possible: “The rule was ‘no exchange of funds’, but it wasn't realistic to follow that through” (PT07). Another interviewee states even more explicitly:

---

<sup>3</sup> The rule of *no exchange of funds* is closely related to the idea of cooperation on eyelevel (ch. 9).