

Beyond my interest in perspectives of discourse and knowledge, turning away from measuring impact is also based on a scientific rationale: It still is considered as nearly impossible to find a scientifically sound quantitative or qualitative measure of research impact. Impact is perceived as “conditional, even serendipitous; allocating resources to it thus remains highly problematic” (Brewer 2011: 256). Extending Brewer’s argument, I would put forward that it is equally problematic to operationalize it: As sustainable development as such is influenced by a plenitude of external factors, it seems problem-laden to develop valid and reliable indicators for measuring impacts that take into account the manifold dimensions of development and, what’s more, to establish causalities between research, the policies framing it, projects’ implementation actions and the multifaceted developmental realities – which might be determined by manifold research-independent variables (Sumner et al. 2009, see ch. 2.4.1). Instead of tracing impact, the concept of impact itself as employed by the BMBF turns into an object of investigation (ch. 9, 10).

4.2 Research design

The research process was laid out in an open design, inspired by grounded theory approaches. Research did not aim at testing a pre-existing hypothesis but at finding a plausible explanation for the empirical data (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Embedded in sociological approaches to discourse and constructivism as conceptual frame (ch. 3), which guided me in developing research questions and data collection methods, my approach to the empirical phenomenon was reconstructive or interpretive. Goal of my empirical data collection and analysis was thus to construct a theory about the research subject through interpreting data through the lens of the conceptual frame (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2014). However, as empirical data was generated, the conceptual frame was open for continuous reassessment in view of its capacity to adequately explain the subject of research as well (Eisenhardt 1989; Mikkelsen 2005; Shah and Corley 2006). In the process of data collection, indeed it showed that the conceptual frame chosen before fieldwork did not correspond entirely to the occurring phenomena. In the research proposal, focus was on the interaction of projects and the policy sphere at a science-policy interface. As empirical research showed that the interfaces between policy and other actors were far more relevant for political decision making, the conceptual frame had to be adapted, the ideas of discourse coalitions and power were integrated within the theoretical frame and applied to the analysis of the interaction of the BMBF with different actors in generating knowledge for policy (ch. 7).