10 Policy effects – coining realities

Discourses have different power effects on different scales. In the previous chapters, some power effects of the BMBF's policy discourse have become clear: A first power effect is to be found in its ability to shape the general policy direction. In the chapters on policy processes and external actors in policy making (ch. 6, 7), I have demonstrated the ministry's power in orienting the contents of the policy discourse by including selected actors and knowledge into the coalition or excluding alternative discursive assumptions.

Maintaining its steering capacity and power over the discourse contents furthermore requires monitoring the research projects in their implementation. As a type of translation of discourse contents to a further level, any implementation process of policies bear risks of re-orientations. The BMBF therefore makes use of a specific dispositive, thus of a strategic infrastructure of practices and institutions which are aimed at creating and monitoring the external effects of discourse (on the theoretical premises, ch. 3). This dispositive includes measures aimed at implementing the specific policy direction envisaged, and thus ranges from explicit criteria of selection within the calls for proposals to controlling instances such as selection committees, to the project management agencies working on the BMBF's behalf in supervising projects and controlling funds, to accompanying projects, etc. While the dispositive contributes to the self-reinforcement of the policy discourse, I argue that through the dispositive, the BMBF also seizes its power over maintaining the status quo of the institutional arrangement among actors as a strategy of discourse stabilisation (ch. 10.1).

A further power effect of policy discourse become relevant in view of the specific discourse on research cooperation with developing countries and emerging economies in sustainability research. The underlying conceptualisations of the effects envisaged, embedded in the specific funding initiatives as most concrete policy levels, coin a specific reality in the projects. The discourse as such thus exerts influence on projects – a fact that is not surprising. As argued in chapter 9, public policy is inherently aimed at causing effects on the real world. However, projects still seized niches for agency, thereby re-interpreting the policy discourse and actualizing it based on their ideas (ch. 10.2). The effects that a funding initiative as a

specific science policy creates therefore rely on both the policy frame as well as the translation into practice by the research projects.

10.1 Effects of policy on projects: Monitoring as a strategy for stabilizing discourse

Most fields of public policy cause effects through laws and regulations, through incentivizing certain behaviour or through preventing others. Science policy as in the case of the BMBF, in contrast, aims at effects at different levels, I'd like to maintain. Science policy aims to shape science and through science: Policies aim to foster science as such and to shape the science system. But at the same time, the BMBF also targets further objectives beyond science. The funded research projects thereby turn into *mediators* of policy objectives. Although not a primary aim, attributing a mediator role of specific policy objectives to the research projects also influences and shapes the science system in the long run.

From the perspective of policy, the existence of this added layer of producing policy effects is important: On the one hand, expected policy effects may get lost in transmission – projects may use their room for agency to reinterpret and adapt the policy discourse. Therefore, policy makers, interested in creating the effects envisaged, monitor projects. On the other hand, the added level of research projects enables the ministry to shift any perceived burden of proving effects, impact or success from the *policy level* to the *project implementation level*. Instead of expecting success of a policy as such, projects can be controlled and supervised in view of their performance. Requesting impact of projects thereby turns into a double-layered strategy of discourse stabilisation and institutional stabilisation used by the BMBF: Impact is conceptualized as a responsibility of the *projects*, which are accordingly scrutinized in view of their results. The role that the funding initiative plays in guiding, enabling and restricting the projects' practices is not part of regular scrutiny and therefore left untouchable to potential criticism. While projects may be blamed for any failure, such as not reaching envisaged objectives, any positive outcomes, such as visible results, can still be attributed to the BMBF and cited as a policy initiative's success story. In a perceived atmosphere of harsh competition between ministerial units, departments and among ministries, this is vital (ch. 7.1, 8.4, 9.2).

The BMBF's objectives and expectations of impact are revealed in the calls for proposals for new funding initiatives. In addition, the ministry's assumptions of how projects achieve effects encourage a specific mode of conducting research within the funded projects (ch. 9). After selecting projects based on these criteria, the BMBF undertakes efforts to further guide the direction of projects and to monitor their implementation. During the implementation phase of selected projects,

the alignment of projects to the BMBF's objectives and expectations is constantly reviewed by making use of a dispositive**.** This dispositive consists of the instruments and institutions of monitoring aimed at ensuring that projects stay in line with the objectives of funding, thus to make sure that the policy discourse is transmitted to the level of project practice.[1] The project management agencies took over supervising and controlling tasks on behalf of the BMBF until the projects end, requiring a documentation in final reports as a last self-assessment (interviews with PA11, PT06).[2]

Both in the Megacities initiative as well as in the IWRM initiative, project funding was split into subsequent phases of funding, with projects required to report on their progress interim in order to receive continued financial support. The ministry thus was in power to end projects by withdrawing resources from projects that did not meet policy expectations. While a premature ending of funding was not a common practice in the main phases of funding initiatives, with the thematic re-orientation of the Megacities funding initiative, some Megacities projects indeed ran out as they did not match the renewed focus of funding (interviews with PT07, PT09). In line with their mandate, the BMBF possesses the power over distributing financial resources, and with it a powerful dispositive of transmitting and stabilizing policy discourse on the project level.

Next to interim reporting, the projects had to present their results in so-called *status seminars*, which took place regularly in both funding initiatives. In case of the Megacities initiative, an interviewee stated that:

> "Status seminars aim at enhancing exchange between the projects, and they are helpful for the project management agencies and the BMBF to observe how far along they are, if goals are achievable or have to be adjusted. It's a sort of self-disciplining for the individual projects to stick to milestones. Although they have been granted a budget for five years, they have to present their status regularly, and show which results they have produced, in which direction they proceed." (PA03)

The advisory boards of the funding initiatives as well as crosscutting accompanying projects of the funding initiatives fulfilled further roles within a dispositive aimed at reinforcing effects: The advisory boards of the Megacities as well as the IWRM funding initiative both rather aimed at monitoring projects than at advising the

1 In chapters 6 and 8, I analyze the larger institutional structures of the BMBF as part of the dispositive of its main policy discourse.

2 According to an interview with PA11, the BMBF assessed a project's success based on the criteria and expectations included within the original call for proposals. In case of IWRM, the standard forms also included a section on the utilisation of results, that (contradictory to the funding initiative's objectives stated elsewhere) only inquired about the economic utilisation of research results, such as market potentials of solutions. Asking merely for the economic viability of results is yet another manifestation of the BMBF's core discourse and technological history.

ministry in view of the policy frame. The BMBF did not consult members of the advisory boards regarding the strategic direction of the programme, did not have a steering function and did not influence changes: "The advisory board was no scientific advisory council for the programme, thus for the programme design, but it was a panel of experts that evaluated the individual projects in view of their work progress." (EE06)

To support projects within the CLIENT and IWRM funding initiatives, the BMBF additionally commissioned an accompanying project titled Assistance for Implementation (AIM), carried out by the International Bureau. Primarily, AIM assisted projects in establishing contacts to development banks and other relevant stakeholders to ensure the upscaling of technological pilot measures that had been developed within the projects (interviews with PA02, PA06, PP06). While officially meant as a support to the projects, many IWRM projects perceived AIM as a controlling agent and felt insecure if AIM recommendations were optional or prescriptive. While AIM itself stated to be purely advisory, feedback reports of the project management agencies critically noted if projects did not follow AIM recommendations (PP40).[3]

Within the Megacities initiative, the crosscutting accompanying initiative supported reflection over implementation activities in later stages of the funding initiative (Future Megacities Support Team 2012). In the prephase, projects were to reflect about potential impact based on a log frame matrix, a tool widely used by the GIZ: "The idea was to support and evaluate the projects in the sense of a service form them. As a self-evaluation." (PT07) According to interviewees, many Megacities projects contested the idea to transfer a monitoring instrument of development cooperation to research projects, questioning its suitability for research as an open-ended process of knowledge generation. At the same time, projects were insecure whether not complying would have negative consequences (interview with PT07, fieldnotes LiWa, 01.08.-31.09.12).

In case of both AIM as well as the GIZ self-evaluation, it was left unclear to projects if the accompanying instruments for reflection on impacts were merely advisory or would also be used for project controlling with negative consequences. The existence of the instruments, of the dispositive in the SKAD sense, had power

3 The existence of AIM demonstrates a few further points. First, AIM proves the BMBF's awareness of its high expectations in view of impact, which, as one interviewee admitted, proved too high for researchers to fulfil who were not able to adequately cope with the task to research and implement or upscale solutions at the same time. Second, AIM also reveals a linearity in the conceptualisation of impact underneath its requirements for transdisciplinarity. If projects were set up in partnership with stakeholders from the beginning, there would not have been any need for AIM. Third, AIM also points to the BMBF's technological discourse. The accompanying measure was purely aimed at assisting with the financing of large-scale technological solutions.

effects, as projects were hesitant not to fulfil potential demands. As has been observed for other instances of evaluation, due to the insecurity about negative drawbacks arising from honest reflections, the projects rather presented their results in the best way possible, hiding underlying problems of implementation from the project management agencies and the BMBF (interview with PT07). In the critical light that constructivist policy research sheds on policy evaluation (Box 10-1), this is not a surprising finding.

Box 10-1: Policy evaluation

Despite the importance attributed to the impact of the projects funded and the apparatus of project monitoring and surveillance, external evaluations about the impact and effects of neither projects nor of the policy initiatives as such were a common practice in the BMBF at the time of field research. The BMBF-funded project Optionen shall be mentioned here as an exception. The project gathered best practices among projects of two previous BMBF funding initiatives for international cooperation in sustainability research in order to present options for improving project set ups and consequently the impacts of inter- and transdisciplinary projects (Lange and Fuest 2015). While the results are relevant for both project implementation as well as policy level, future will tell whether these will be integrated into the design of new funding initiatives.

Interviewees attributed the lack of missing project evaluations – apart from the final self-evaluations – to the ministry's fear of obtaining mediocre results and not being able to expose project results as programme success (interview with PP27).

From a constructivist perspective, the absence of evaluations of the policy as such is not a shortcoming, either. Since Pressman and Wildavsky's seminal work on policy implementation (1984), social scientists have reflected about the inherent complexity of translating policy expectations into specific effects and challenged the explanatory validity of impact evaluations of policy (Jann and Wegrich 2006). Difficulties of establishing causal relations between a specific policy, research funded within its frame, and a phenomenon in the real world are widely acknowledged (Douthwaite et al. 2007; Pregernig 2007; Sumner et al. 2009; Martin 2011; Bornmann 2013; Ely and Oxley 2014).

However, the fact that no regular evaluations of policy effects were carried out within the BMBF at the time of empirical research is telling. Reality contrasts with conceptions of an idealtype policy process, in which policymakers continuously reflect and evaluate their actions and programmes, adjusting methods, envisaged impacts, and objectives, thus changing directions whenever necessary in order to improve policy effects (Wildavsky 2007 [1979]; Jann and Wegrich 2009). Evaluations potentially point at needs to change practices and institutions and thus may come with organ-

isational costs attached. Yet, bureaucracies such as ministerial administrations are rather interested in stabilizing their status quo than encouraging change as a result of evaluations (Weingart 2006; Wildavsky 2007 [1979]; Jann and Wegrich 2009). Not evaluating policies is thus a strategy of discourse stabilisation, I put forward.

The endeavour to evaluate science policy can also be challenged in view of the possibility to produce meaningful results. If evaluations are done, their framing and outcomes depend on the social actors involved in the previous policy process, interdependencies, such as stakes of the usual addressees of a certain policy (Wildavsky 2007 [1979]; Jann and Wegrich 2009). Framing evaluations according to the own needs is therefore a further strategy of reiterating discursive directions. This inherently normative and political nature of evaluations is illustrated by one of the exceptional instances in which BMBF funding initiatives were indeed reviewed. Before designing FONA3, the BMBF selected a few funding initiatives out of FONA2 to be assessed, among them the Megacities funding initiative. In the audit, project coordinators were to present their project results in front of a panel of external reviewers as well as BMBF and project management agency staff (email exchange with PP05, interview with PT09). The projects input on their systemic orientation, transdisciplinary set up and their innovations developed were then summarized in a conclusive report. Although the audit was not aimed at assessing individual projects, but at lessons learnt of the programme as such, projects did not dare to address any critical issues about the funding frame and rather pointed at successes than at difficulties. In addition, the audit also demonstrated the self-interest of the ministry as well as the project management agencies involved in funding. Admitting a programme's failure could potentially have negative institutional consequences, such as not receiving further public budget for similar funding initiatives. An interviewee of one of the project management agencies acknowledged:

"Well, it wasn't a real evaluation. It was more of a dry run, and a sample. And only those funding initiatives were chosen that had a transdisciplinary approach already, while there are still many additional ones that don't. And of course, Unit 723 [the Global Change Unit] hopes, and so do we, that next year there will be a further research programme on urbanisation. We pushed for that." (PT09)

At the same time, the projects interviewed also stated that the BMBF was not keen on receiving any feedback in view of the funding conditions or the structure of the funding initiatives as such, either. No structured feedback loops between the ministry and funded projects existed. Different project participants as well as advisory board members voiced that the BMBF was not interested in learning about their experience regarding project set up, structural issues or country expertise (interviews with PP25, PP27, EE6), an impression that participant observation at a status

conference of the Megacities initiative and a FONA forum re-affirmed (fieldnotes on FONA Forum, 09.-11.09.13, fieldnotes on Megacities conference, 14.-16.05.13).

From a SKAD perspective, I argue that the BMBF's disinterest in integrating project knowledge into policy is a strategy of maintaining authority about the policy discourse by minimizing potentials for discourse actualisation. Researchers in BMBF-funded projects are addressees of the BMBF discourse on cooperation, while in carrying out projects, at the same time they contribute to stabilizing the discourse through their practice. Enabling them to frame problems from their own perspective might endanger the BMBF's powerful position and contribute to the transformation of discourse. The BMBF therefore only superficially grants room for reflection and feedback. This adds to the pronounced tendencies of discourse stabilisation – instead of discursive change – through discourse coalitions described in chapters 6 and 7.

10.2 Projects between the influence of policy and rooms of adaptation

10.2.1 Intended effects, side effects and their representation

After looking at the means of creating policy effects, of stabilizing discourse in the process of transmitting policy to the implementation level, this section focuses on the effects as such. Policies aim to coin realities and accordingly set a frame to the projects. The funding initiatives on Megacities and on IWRM did so in different ways and therefore provide an interesting contrast. They left different scopes of agency and interpretation for the funded projects – which substantially influenced the type of output that projects designed and implemented. The funding initiatives on the policy level thus enabled the projects to have certain effects on the real world and restricted others.

Whether denominating them as outcomes, results, products, innovations or as different types of knowledge: The projects in the Megacities as well as the IWRM funding initiatives produced a large variety of outputs targeted at science as well as in society. Appendices B-3a and B-3b give an overview over the different kinds of project outputs obtained in both funding initiatives – as perceived by the projects. It is important to mention this as a caveat: The overview mirrors the way in which projects *represented* their outputs in projects briefs, in the Megacities projects' case, and in IWRM information material, in the IWRM projects' case as well as in interviews, rather than giving an objective overview of project output. Practices of social construction of reality come into play in the representation of project outputs, too: The tables reflect only those types of outcomes which the projects perceived as important enough to be included in brochures and project briefs. These mirror the BMBF's expectations from the projects' perspective and display the policy