Aspects of Coherence in Contemporary Policy Evaluation

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Presentation to Webinar: Measuring Coherence of Complex Interventions

The Evaluation Centre for Complex Health Interventions

The University of Toronto

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Where I'm coming from….

Speaking as evaluation adviser and methodological consultant with EU, UK and other governments & agencies. I'm going to draw on experience & examples of policy evaluation:

1. EU Structural Funds - that support economic and social development in Member States, encouraging priorities such as: strengthening RTD and innovation; enhancing SME competitiveness; supporting shifts to low carbon economy & climate change adaptation; promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and discrimination….. etc
2. UK energy policy which is centred around around three objectives of security of supply, affordability, and decarbonisation – referred to as the energy 'trilemma'; & includes energy efficiency, demand reduction, smart grids, home heating, fuel poverty etc.

*I'll be communicating **my** tentative learning & conclusions, **not** current institutional thinking or practice – but I'm confident of direction of travel*

‘Policy Coherence’ in European Union & OECD

- Coherence now a ‘new’ (2020) OECD evaluation criteria, entered European policy vocabulary in 1992 Maastricht Treaty – i.e., consistency/coherence of development policies *with* trade, foreign policy or migration policy
- Entered EU evaluation lexicon in guidance (MEANS 1999, EVALSED 2004, 2013) that noted both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ coherence – i.e., consistency of elements *making up* a policy action versus consistency between a policy action and *other* policy actions

I would argue our understandings of complexity over last 20 years has redrawn the boundaries between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ coherence

Four Contemporary Aspects of Coherence

A ‘coherence lens’ highlights aspects of coherence in evaluation that follow from the design and demands of contemporary policy making:

- *Unit of analysis* – coherence with changing scope and scale of policy interventions
- *Coordination and Governance* – arrangements to manage coherence
- *Timing* – coherence with policy time-scales
- *Substantive Theory* – coherence with domain theory & research - not only programme theory

All these aspects have methodological and policy implications

Aspect One: An evolving unit of analysis

- Growing understanding of policy interdependence: focus shifting from projects to programmes in 1990s; to policies, strategies & multi-level governance in 2000s; now an increasing interest in ‘nexus’ and aligned priorities
- Many policy priorities are understood to be complex and innately interdependent– e.g. sustainability, innovation, zero carbon, climate change mitigation, equity and justice, & health inequalities…..

Unit of analysis – shifting Focus and Methodology

i. Decontextualised policy interventions – coherent with policy inputs
ii. Contextualised policy intervention – coherent with policy/non policy inputs/other policies/wider contexts
iii. Linked policies interventions – coherence *between* several policies *across* contexts
iv. Policy systems of multiple interdependent policy interventions – many and changing possibilities for coherence and incoherence

Accompanying methodological shift:

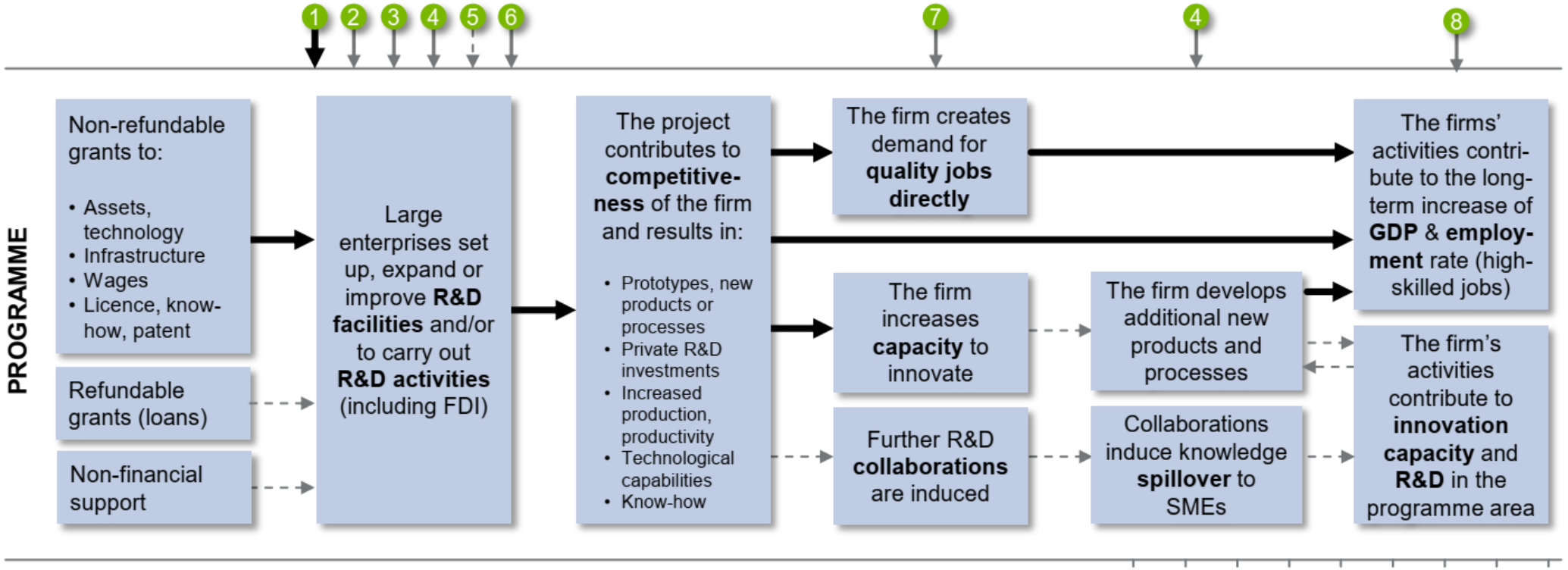
- Effect of one main cause (the intervention) >> Effects of multiple causes >>Causes of Effects>> Configurations/ INUS causality>>Probabilistic causation and low predictability systems
- Linear ToCs few causal pathways/mechanisms >> Context rich ToCs, multiple pathways/mechanisms >>Modelling and Systems mapping, characterised by 'equifinality'

Two Examples

First: A context rich Theory of Change encompassing multiple policy interventions & causal pathways- from an EU evaluation of Structural Funds:
Evaluation Final Report: Ex post evaluation of support to large enterprises: DG Regional & Urban Affairs, European Commission 2016

Second: A 'systems' map of UK energy policies and programmes, highlighting interdependence of supply reliability, affordability & carbon emission goals:
Barbrook-Johnson P and Penn A (2021) Participatory systems mapping for complex energy policy evaluation. Evaluation 27(1): 57–79

7.4. Theory of Change 'LE4': Investment in R&D capacity



Assumptions and external factors

1. Company strategy foresees innovation, growth and export
2. Developed basic infrastructure (motorways, airport access, ICT infrastructure)
3. Developed regional innovation system (absorptive capacity) and R&D infrastructure (etc. research centres)
4. Availability of R&D partners for collaboration
5. Business culture is supportive of collaborations
6. Labour market supplies labour in required number and qualification levels
7. Innovation is not contrary to employment growth
8. General economic conditions enable growth and export

Indirect effects and wider benefits

a. Developed human capital base in the area
b. Attracting other companies / R&D in the region
c. Improved local R&D, transportation, ICT infrastructure
d. Improved social infrastructure (education, culture etc.)
e. Spillover of improved business practices, skills, knowledge, R&D and efficient technologies (local enterprises)
f. Spread of improved working culture (working conditions, wage levels, timely wages, values, stability etc.)
g. Greater workforce mobility („quality" jobs)
h. Crowding-out of SMEs from labour market (skilled labour)
i. Distort market equilibrium (effect on SMEs & non-supported)

Legend

CAUSE: *A* is one of the main, fundamental causes of *B*) ('**must have**')

PRE-CONDITION: A is a necessary pre-condition of B, but not the main cause of that (lacking of which prevents B)

SUPPORTING FACTOR: A is contributing to B, but is neither a cause nor a pre-condition of that ('**nice to have**')

Source: KPMG/Prognos (2016). Evaluation Final Report: Ex post evaluation of support to large enterprises: DG Regional & Urban Affairs, European Commission 2016

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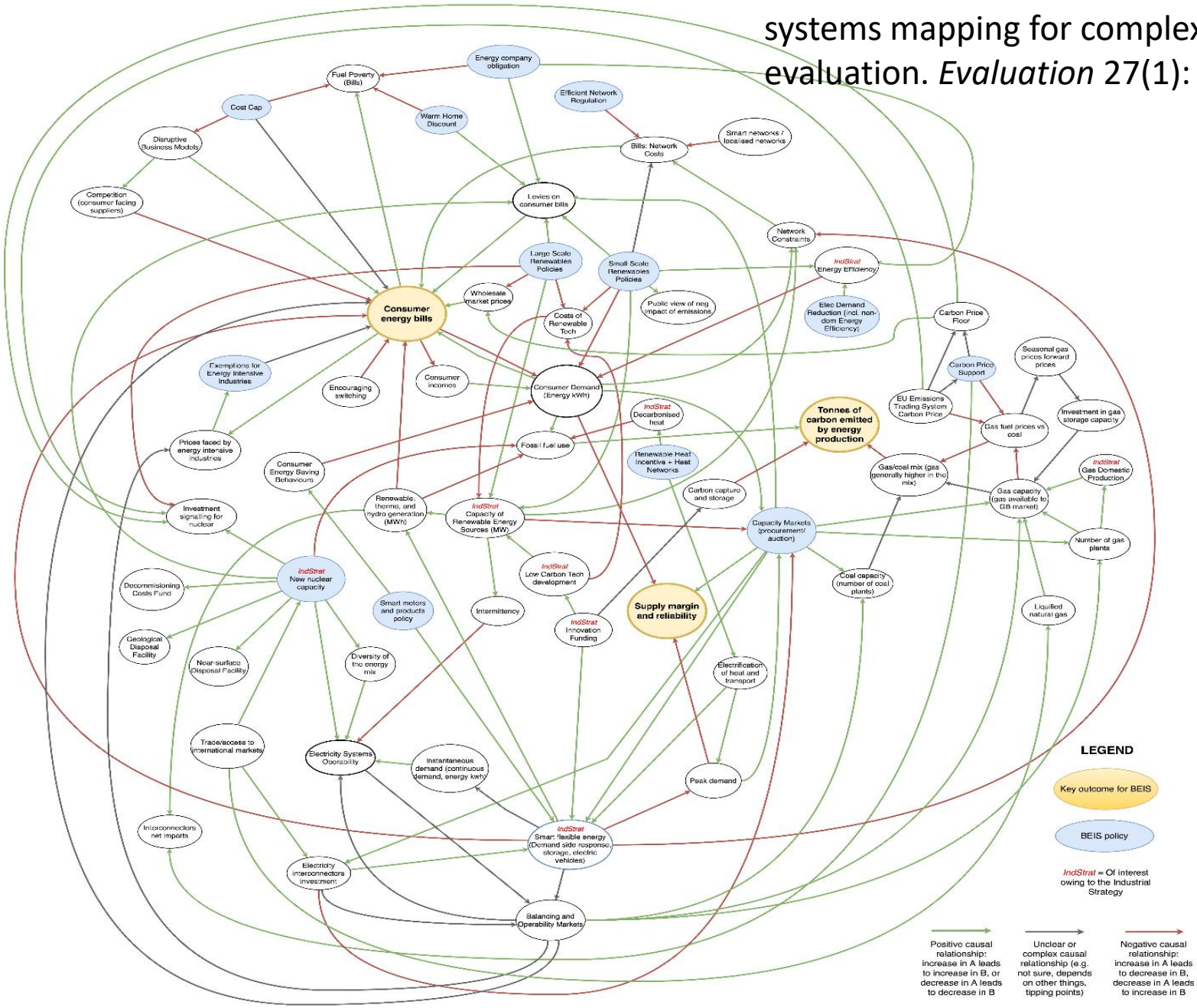

Aspect Two: Coordination and Governance

- Multi-part, separate but interdependent policy interventions usually need to be aligned: growing importance of coordination & governance arrangements
- Success often depends on pre-existing community, sectoral or territorial networks; the credibility of system leaders; capacities to use information and adapt; participatory engagement of stakeholders
- Coordination and governance has itself to be evaluated and included in models, ToCs and case-studies
- Those in governance and coordination roles will themselves generate and use evaluation and monitoring data - & reflexively learn how to improve coordination/governance so as to strengthen coherence within and between policy interventions

Coherence doesn't happen on its own!

Aspect Three: Time - Re-setting the Evaluation Clock!

- Move away from one-off ex post evaluation at end of time-bounded programme/policy, to integrating evaluation into policy & programming cycle - revaluing ex ante & mid-term/ongoing evaluations
- Ex post evaluations cover extended time-scales – looking back over this *and* previous policy cycles on a rolling basis - synthesising 'lessons' across sites *and* time
- Mid term evaluations increasingly inform 'reprogramming' (now expected if long policy cycles). The emergence of 'steering' and adaptive management – UK energy policy consciously used 'action research' alongside evaluation to inform implementation

Ensuring policy-making & evaluation are coherent with real-world timescales

Aspect Four: Importance of Substantive theory

Moving from narrow focus on programmes & recognising the importance of complexity, context and interdependencies, changes where we look for theory

- 'Programme theory' as in the assumptions and theories of policy makers and programme managers is not enough- as long-ago noted by Carol Weiss
- Becoming standard in UK and in EU Structural Fund evaluations to look to academic research to identify the building blocks of 'Theories of Change'
- Examples: Innovations Systems Theory; Energy Transition Theory; Energy Practices in the home; Local Economic Development etc
- Centrality therefore of 'literature reviews' and evaluations teams that include academic partnerships and domain experts

Overall impact evaluation report from NDSEMIC's Research & Evaluation Programme. Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. London. November 2020

Theory on how innovation occurs during transitions

The expected shift to a low carbon economy is widely regarded as an example of a sustainability transition - large-scale disruptive changes in societal systems that emerge over a long period of decades.[51] Given the long-term nature of this ambition, it is useful to consider the processes that may be involved and how these may provide opportunities for the normalisation of smart energy management services.

Some researchers of sustainability transitions theory[52] argue that, rather than taking place in a diffuse and generalised way, such transitions involve distinct **shifts in 'socio-technical regimes'**. These refer to the ways in which user practices and behaviours interrelate with technologies, supporting policies and infrastructure, preferences and culture. These regimes are usually relatively stable (resistant to change).

According to this view, **changes to the status quo begin within 'niches'**, which are often small networks of actors who are supporting innovation due to their future expectations and visions. These networks work together to develop innovation and learning across their organisations. This includes learning about new 'socio-technical (ST) configurations', i.e. how organisations organise their production or service activities in terms of human resources and technologies.

[51] Loorbach et al Sustainability Transitions Research: Transforming Science and Practice for Societal Change 2017

[52] E.g. Schot, J.W., Geels, F.W., 2008. Strategic niche management and sustainable innovation journeys: theory, findings, research agenda and policy. Technology Analysis and Strategic Management 20, 537–554

On ‘Measurement’

- I have talked about evaluation and in particular evaluation that tries to identify the effectiveness of policy interventions and how and why they are effective. I’ve not addressed ‘measurement’ even though in Webinar title!
- There is much ‘measurement’ and ‘monitoring’ of all these programmes, especially in EU Structural funds which has an elaborate monitoring system & conducts macro-economic modelling extensively

My view is that these measurement approaches are valid at a micro and meso level but are less able to connect macro policy outcomes to particular policies or to explain and therefore signpost how to improve policy interventions and their results

Postscript

Quote from Andreas Wagner's 1997 Santa Fe Working Paper on Causality in Complex Systems (SFI Working Paper: 1997-08-075)

In sum, there are good reasons not to abandon the notion of causality, as suggested by Russell (1913), because it is useful in systems that behave qualitatively linear in the sense used here. For such systems, powerful statistical tools exist to delineate causal interactions. Because these tools in general rely on measures of linear associations, they are likely to fail for qualitatively nonlinear systems. In these systems statistical reasoning can not replace insight into functional relations among variables, as given by a mathematical formalism describing their interactions.

I would suggest that the kinds of evaluations of complex policy interventions I've described can increase 'insight into functional relations among variables' and thereby inform policy-making. They do not set out to measure policy effectiveness

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