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Introduction: policy integration and institutional capacity: theoretical, conceptual and empirical challenges

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ABSTRACT

The issue of institutional capacity has received increased attention in the research on policy integration, bringing about the proliferation of conceptions aimed at capturing the linkage between cross-sectoral aspects of policy designs and the specific attributes that governmental institutions and processes should possess in order to effectively formulate and implement integrated policies. This article contributes to reducing conceptual and analytical fragmentation in this field by elaborating on the different dimensions which compose the broadly defined 'institutional capacity' and outlining its link with policy integration. More specifically, our objective is three-fold. First, we elaborate on the theoretical and conceptual accounts of institutional capacity with particular regard to integrated policy designs, suggesting an analytical framework that unpacks the different dimensions of institutional capacity through a range of empirical indicators. Second, we discuss the analytical, conceptual and empirical challenges that arise with the study of institutional capacities for policy integration, drawing also on the main findings provided by the contributions to the Thematic Issue. Third, we suggest some promising venues for future research and collect a number of policy-relevant recommendations on institutional capacity, policy integration and policy effectiveness.



KEYWORDS

Policy integration;
institutional capacity; policy
change; policy design

Introduction

This Thematic Issue deals with the phenomenon of policy integration and explores the conceptual, analytical and empirical challenges arising with regard to the institutional capacities that are needed for the creation and implementation of integrated policy designs.

Over the past decade, an integrated policy approach has been strongly advocated, since a normative call sprung asking for a better coherence of measures across sectors, improved consistency of policy instruments, and enhanced cooperation between all actors involved in the process of both policy formulation and implementation. It comes as no surprise that a burgeoning amount of academic research has been dealing with the phenomenon of policy integration since the late 1990s, investigating its various forms (Howlett & Saguin, 2018), discussing conceptual and analytical challenges related

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to its study (Candel & Biesbroek, 2016) and raising normative and practical questions connected to the feasibility of integrated policy designs (Peters, 2018), including barriers to their implementation (Catalano, Graziano, & Bassoli, 2015).

Among other crosscutting issues, the problem of capacity has widely been mentioned in the policy integration literature (Jordan & Schout, 2006; Peters, 2015). When analysing governments' ability to deal with complex issues such as climate change, aging population, global economic crisis and sustainable development, studies have referred to state capacity (Fukuyama, 2013), public sector capacity (Polidano, 2000), political capacity (Chindarkar, Howlett, & Ramesh, 2017) or policy capacity (Howlett & Saguin, 2018; Ramesh, Howlett, & Saguin, 2016a). Few attempts have been made to elaborate on the different components of the broader public governance capacity (Peters, 2018), distinguishing between its political and administrative dimensions (Trein, et al., 2019) or unpacking them analytically (Lodge & Wegrich, 2014).

Yet, some recent research has illustrated that the nature of integrated policies poses a number of specific challenges for governments, requiring to improve the coherence of policy-making by deliberately adopting inclusive strategies that 'bring together multiple actors to negotiate, deliberate and agree on actions to be undertaken' (Howlett & Saguin, 2018, p. 6). When designing integrated policies, governments can choose among different strategies and different forms of intervention, which can involve to varying extent different layers of policy-making, i.e. policy goals, financial instruments and economic resources, procedures and governance principles (Graziano, 2011).

Therefore, governance-oriented studies have shown how specific institutional arrangements can improve policy integration through wider political coordination mechanisms (Peters, 2018), networked modes of governance (Jordan & Schout, 2006) or administrative coordination capacities (Christensen et al., 2019). A policy-oriented scholarship, in its turn, illustrated how policy integration reforms can be encouraged through specific policy instruments and strategies (Rayner & Howlett, 2009) and to what extent the politics-related factors (i.e. political or party preferences) may affect this process (Trein et al., 2019). The former strand of studies has mostly focused on policy implementation, whereas the latter mainly analysed the formulation stage.

The recent attempts to bring policy integration and capacity within a more comprehensive conceptual framework have adopted a policy design perspective, suggesting that a set of resources and skills are required in order to ensure effective integrated policy designs, involving analytical, operational and political capacities (Howlett & Saguin, 2018; Wu, Howlett, & Ramesh, 2018). The different combinations of the aforementioned capacities bring about the different forms of policy integration, supported by more or less consistent policy goals and instruments. While emphasising the importance of 'governance capacity', that is 'the organisational and systemic resources necessary to establish a more coherent policy-making process' (Ramesh *et al.*, 2016), this framework does not develop on how these capacities can be measured empirically and remains ambiguous about the way in which they relate to the homologous 'policy capacities' as conceived by previous studies (Wu, Ramesh, & Howlett, 2015).

Overall, the literature dealing with the broadly defined institutional capacity issues for policy integration has been largely normative and descriptive, making little effort to unpack causal mechanisms and dynamics underlying institutional change that enables the shift from sectoral policies to integrated designs (Trein, Maggetti, & Meyer, 2020).

In summary, although numerous studies have pointed out the centrality of the institutional domain for policy integration, they have used the term ‘institutional capacity’ as synonymous to ‘governance capacity’ or administrative capacity’, generally referring to the ability of governmental institutions to successfully perform given functions or deliver public policies. Most of the existing research has focused on the organizational and procedural aspects associated with such capacities. Little attention has been paid to other institutional dimensions (e.g. norms, rules, routines, and values) and possible linkages between them. Therefore, our understanding of how institutions matter for policy integration and what constitutes institutional capacity required by integrated designs remains fragmented and somewhat incomplete. Further efforts are needed to capture this complexity conceptually and provide consistent empirical evidence of different policy contexts in a systematic manner. A more nuanced understanding of the institutional obstacles and drivers of policy integration is still to be achieved.

The aforementioned theoretical and empirical challenges have become ever more compelling as the demand for policy integration has been growing, in particular as a consequence of the adoption of the Agenda 2030 that has forced practitioners and academics ‘to rethink many underlying principles about this relatively old but poorly understood concept in the policy sciences’ (Howlett & Saguin, 2018, p. 1).

In order to contribute to filling existing gaps, this Thematic Issue first elaborates on the conceptual linkage between policy integration and institutional capacities by mapping the analytical dimensions within which the two phenomena intersect. Far from the ambition of providing an exhaustive and complete operationalisation of this framework, it nevertheless illustrates how these linkages can be captured empirically, illustrating when, whether and how institutional capacities matter for integrated policy designs across different contexts. Put differently, the Thematic Issue is aimed at a) clarifying and operationalising the notions of policy integration and institutional capacity; b) testing some tentative new explanations of policy integration by focusing on the impact of partially neglected factors such as leadership and ideology on institutional capacity; c) providing a set of empirical cases which contribute to enriching the literature in an analytically informed manner.

This contribution is organised as follows: Section Two introduces the main issues and gaps in the research on institutional capacity for integrated policy designs. Section Three discusses the key elements of the conceptual framework which is the backbone of the Thematic issue, while section Four summarises the key findings of the various contributions and outlines their specific links with the conceptual framework. Section Five concludes by identifying some key challenges for future research and offers a number of policy-relevant recommendations.

Institutional capacity for integrated policy designs: open questions and knowledge gaps

Governance capacity, state capacity, quality of government, policy capacity, administrative capacity, institutional capacity: these are only a few of the concepts that have been used in research efforts aimed at focusing on the relational, political and knowledge resources considered necessary to produce effective governance (Dai & De Vries, 2018, p. 102–103). Due to space limitations, we cannot provide an overall assessment of the

various strands of the literature, but a preliminary conceptual clarification is needed, as the aforementioned terms have often been used interchangeably.

Governance capacity has been a notion used in an evocative fashion until very recently to denote a comprehensive system of resources required for supporting coherent policy-making (Fukuyama, 2013; Howlett & Saguin, 2018; Ramesh, Saguin, Howlett, & Wu, 2016b). As Christensen, Læg Reid, and Rykkja (2016) put it, governance capacity includes 'formal structural and procedural features of the governmental administrative apparatus but also informal elements, that is, how these features work in practice' (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 888). When dealing with integrated policies, a governance capacity perspective is deemed to be preferred over 'state capacity' or 'policy capacity', as it goes beyond enforcement rules and implementation authority, being 'a means of establishing, promoting, supporting and institutionalizing a relationship between governmental and non-governmental actors in the integration process' (Howlett & Saguin, 2018, p. 10). Such capacity has largely been associated with vertical and horizontal coordination, inclusive decision-making, and voluntary policy convergence based on soft policy guidance, benchmarking and learning (Jordan & Schout, 2006). Some scholars have conceptualised governance capacity in terms of administrative capacity (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2020).

State capacity is probably the concept that travelled the most since it has been applied by different disciplines (public administration, political geography, political science, public administration, environmental sciences, etc.) and by both academics and practitioners. State capacity refers primarily to three core dimensions: 'administration of some very basic set of services, security provision, and extraction' (Soifer, 2012, p. 590). The attempts to operationalize these characteristics have resulted in the creation of capacity indexes, underscoring specific indicators of government effectiveness. For example, the *Quality of Government* (QoG) notion has also been discussed in the literature for the past two decades and has gained greater attention after the theoretical and empirical work started by Rothstein and Teorell (2008). In this specific strand of the literature, the focus is on the 'impartiality of institutions that exercise government authority' (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008: 165). The Quality of Government Institute at Gothenburg University has done an impressive job in data collection, allowing substantial advancements in the mapping of differential quality of governments in the world. Furthermore, more recently the dataset has also been enriched by regional-level data – which made the usage of the QoG indicators even more diffused.

The administrative domain has received particular attention from scholars and practitioners alike, who elaborated on specific *administrative capacities* required to effectively address compound policy problems. Drawing on either policy-oriented or organization-focused approaches, existing studies provide extensive evidence of how administrative coordination reforms have been relevant for supporting new cross-sectoral policy regimes (Jochim & May, 2010). The contribution by Lodge and Wegrich (2014) has been fundamental in this sense, although not focusing specifically on the issue of policy integration. By distinguishing between *coordination*, *analytical regulation* and *delivery* types of administrative capacity, the above-mentioned scholars helpfully unpack the variety of demands placed on governments by increasingly complex policy problems, which require appropriate problem-solving abilities. Studies on *administrative capacity* have primarily developed within the framework of policy implementation research,

which has particularly flourished in the EU's context. Understanding how the (lack of) capacity of public administration to comply with specific rules and procedures, especially in multilevel policy settings, affects the quality of policy implementation has been at the core of this research agenda (Milio, 2007; Terracciano & Graziano, 2016). However, these studies have largely adopted a compliance perspective, whereas the questions which specific administrative settings and skills are required for multi-level and transboundary policy-making remains unanswered (Heidbreder, 2014).

The three notions are indisputably useful for broad, large-N comparison, especially at the national level. However, they may be less helpful and even somewhat misleading if the focus of research is boundary-spanning issues or multi-level policy settings. Research on state capacity has primarily focused on the general functioning of the state and central governmental bodies, largely overlooking more specific dimensions including cross-sectoral, functional or the micro-level dynamics. Studies on governance capacity have contributed to filling this gap, but few efforts have been made to bridge structural-instrumental and cultural-institutional domains (Christensen et al., 2016).

With this regard, the concept of *policy capacity* has brought an important contribution (Peters, 2015; Wu et al., 2015), referring to a 'set of skills and resources – or competences and capabilities – necessary to perform policy functions'. The focus, therefore, shifts from structural and performance to knowledge-based aspects. The policy capacity approach identifies three types of skills (analytical, operational and political) that policy actors develop at systemic, organizational and individual levels, and which are essential for policy success (Wu et al., 2015). Another important difference of this conception from those reported above is that, by definition, policy capacity can be created and actively enhanced through learning processes and skills formation.

All these approaches are of great relevance for understanding the effectiveness of policy response to thorny (Capano, Howlett, Darryl, Ramesh, & Goyal, 2020) or wicked problems (Peters & Tarpey, 2019), but they have only partially addressed a number of institutional capacity attributes required for effective integrated policy designs. The above-mentioned literature does not reflect that public administration is composed of a 'political mind' and 'an administrative body', while almost totally overlooking the ideational, symbolic and discursive components of institutional capacity (Lang, Radaelli, & Tosun, 2015). Furthermore, the analysis has largely focused on organizational level, and we know little about the role of individual actors in the perspective of wider structural and policy changes related to the shift from sectoral to boundary spanning policy regimes (Williams, 2002). As a matter of fact, the attempts of the policy integration scholarship to incorporate the various aspects and components of institutional capacity have resulted in significant conceptual fragmentation (Trein et al., 2020), leaving many questions about the linkage between the two phenomena unanswered. This collection aims to contribute to bridging this gap, by suggesting a definition of institutional capacity and elaborating on a range of specific features of public policy-making necessary to effective integrated designs.

Existing studies have provided extensive evidence of how the peculiar nature of integrated policies has posed a number of challenges to governmental institutions, requiring them to transform consolidated policy-making processes and structures in order to meet the criteria of *coherence*, *coordination*, *consistency*. While the research on policy integration has focused on barriers and obstacles arising from the implementation

of boundary spanning interventions for traditional institutional settings shaped along sectoral lines (Trein et al., 2019), studies on integrated policy designs have reflected on how the specific challenges related to integrated policies (e.g. policy silos, sub-optimal policy outcomes) can be addressed through re-aligning and replacing certain elements of established regimes with new policy mixes (Rayner & Howlett, 2009). The latter strand of studies suggests that *coherence* of policy ideas and goals can be ensured through a holistic and comprehensive approach to the definition of an integrated strategy involving multiple policy domains (Rayner & Howlett, 2009). While recognising that institutional structures designed for individual interventions may not be equipped to deal with integrated designs, these studies do not elaborate on institutional attributes required for such purpose. Likewise, they do not develop on how institutional factors matter for the consistency of policy instruments, which should be complementary and mutually reinforcing in the pursuit of integrated policy goals (Howlett & Ramesh, 2014; Rayner & Howlett, 2009). On the other hand, studies on policy coordination emphasise the need to develop vertical and horizontal collaborative governance arrangements (Jordan & Schout, 2006), along with supporting policy coordination mechanisms aimed at avoiding redundancy and overlaps between policy programmes (Peters, 2015). This research lacks a systematic and nuanced focus on the criteria of coherence and consistency developed by the integrated policy design scholarship.

Hence, the manifold although fragmented and somewhat overlapping insights on broadly understood institutional capacities for integrated policy designs exist, emphasising the relevance of the organizational coordination rationale for creating and improving policy integration. The achievement of broader composite policy goals requires cross – sectoral policy measures (Candel & Biesbroek, 2016, pp. 211–2; Jochim & May, 2010), which need to be supported by dedicated coordination structures and procedures transcending the institutional responsibilities of individual departments (Meijers & Stead, 2004). Additional governance arrangements can also be helpful in further extending the scope of decision-making by including new actors and stakeholders (Jordan & Schout, 2006).

More recently, scholars have emphasised the importance of ideational and informal aspects for integrated policy-making, illustrating how cross-sectoral problem solving requires abandoning traditional policy paradigms (Trein & Maggetti, 2019), developing new mindsets (Christensen et al., 2019) and learning processes (Dunlop, 2015). The shift from sectoral to integrated designs may involve changes in one or more policy components, namely policy paradigms, programmes and instruments (Hall, 1993), while intimately intersecting with the process of institutional transformation across these levels. The *scope* of these transformations can be asymmetric and they progress with different *speed* across the different sub-fields included into a given policy mix, showing variable dynamics at different scales (international, national and sub-national). The underlying mechanisms of these transformations are extremely complex too, as they involve not only structural reorganisation (Peters, 2015), accompanied by the purposeful alignment of units, roles and tasks (Bouckaert, Peters, & Verhoest, 2010), but also cultural and cognitive aspects, such as beliefs, trust and individual perceptions (Christensen et al., 2019; Dunlop, 2015). Despite the research on these issues has been burgeoning, we know little about the ideational drivers of and barriers to institutional configurations required for integrated policy designs. In this sense, government or party preferences and orientations (Trein et al., 2019), administrative cultures (Catalano et al., 2015), political will (Steurer, 2008) and

organisational political learning capacity (Dunlop, 2015) are among the few factors that have been considered to be important. Lastly, little progress has been made in developing a comprehensive view of capacity-building for integrated designs, underestimating the importance of the micro foundations of this process and widely neglecting linkages between the macro-meso-micro levels (Trein et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, the articles collected in this Thematic Issue aim to contribute to improving our knowledge on the linkage between policy integration and institutional capacities by:

- Bridging fragmentation and building missing connections in the conceptual framework linking the two phenomena;
- Suggesting and operationalising novel analytical approaches, helping unpack the specific components of institutional capacity for integrated designs, as well as causal mechanisms underlying policy integration and the related capacity-building reforms;
- Advancing empirical research in the field by developing comparative analysis, covering the so far underexplored policy sectors and territorial scales;
- Identifying pathways for future research on specific challenges concerning institutional capacities for integrated designs;
- Providing practical recommendations on how to improve institutional capacity for integrated policy designs.

Conceptual framework and operationalisation

Far from the ambition of providing a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding institutional capacity and its link with integrated policy designs, we adopt a new institutionalist framework (March & Olsen, 1989, 2005; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scharpf, 2000) with a two-fold objective: i) identify and systematise the various institutional capacity components that are relevant for integrated policy designs; ii) bridge these theoretical propositions with the practical implications provided by the broader research on capacity issues (El-Taliawi & Van Der Wal, 2019; Lodge & Wegrich, 2014).

Although the original new institutional thinking has not elaborated on the phenomenon of policy integration (March & Olsen, 1989), it provides a helpful comprehensive framework allowing us to capture a variety of institutional characteristics that are relevant for integrated policy designs across the three levels of capacity: systemic, organisational and individual (NEI, 2002; Wu et al., 2015).

The core assumption is that institutions create elements of order and predictability, in as far as ‘they fashion, enable and constrain political actors as they act within a logic of appropriate action’ (March & Olsen, 2005, p. 5). Institutions embody identities and roles, and they shape polity’s character, history and visions. Another essential postulation is that the translation of structures into political action is generated by routine processes, producing recurring modes of action and organisational patterns (March & Olsen, 2005), but also through ideas, values and discourse (Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004). Rules regulating behaviour include procedures, conventions, roles, organizational forms around which political activities are constructed, but also beliefs, paradigms, codes, cultures and knowledge that surround, support, elaborate, and contradict those roles and routines (March & Olsen, 1989, p. 22). Institutions are not static, while aggregate behaviour in a decision

process at a systemic level can be seen as the merging of independent [micro] flows of problems, solutions, decision-makers and choice opportunities (March & Olsen, 1989, p. 5). Understanding how the aforementioned components evolve in relation to policy change has been at the centre of institutionalist debate, which investigated the dynamics and results of this process throughout reproduction, conversion, layering, displacement and, ultimately, exhaustion of consolidated policy settings (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Seminal studies on integrated policy designs (Rayner & Howlett, 2009) have largely drawn on this framework, although several questions they raised about how policy integration can be tailored through institutional reforms still remain to be answered.

We suggest that elaborating on the concept of institutional capacity can be helpful in understanding the shift from sectoral towards integrated policy-making. Drawing on new institutionalist assumptions, we suggest that this concept revolves around *a set of formal and informal rules, norms, procedures, as well as values, beliefs, knowledge and skills, enabling the reconciliation composite policy goals, harmonisation of multiple policy instruments and coordination of relevant policy actors*. The ability of governmental institutions to generate and consolidate the specific rules, principles and arrangements for policy-making processes to meet the criteria of coherence, consistency and coordination forms the backbone of institutional capacity for integrated designs. Obviously enough, identifying and measuring informal aspects (Selznick, 1996) of institution-building for integrated policy is a challenging task, but, as the empirical findings of this SI show, aspects such as administrative routines, expert knowledge and party preferences can matter for integrated policy designs as much as formal procedures do.

Adopting a three-level perspective on capacity, which has been extensively validated by both scholarly research (El-Taliawi & Van Der Wal, 2019; Wu et al., 2015) and policy guidance (NEI 2002; European Commission, 2002), we suggest that institutional capacity for integrated designs materialises through the following characteristics, which are broadly underpinned by the criteria of coherence, constancy and coordination:

Table 1. Institutional capacity and policy integration.

		Institutional characteristics relevant for policy integration	
		Description	Empirical measures
Levels of capacity			Formal
			Informal
Systemic	A comprehensive system of norms and rules aimed at the attainment of coherent boundary spanning policy regimes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy programmes and plans establishing coherent and coordinated interventions across several policy sectors • Dedicated instruments, methods and techniques enabling policy coordination and consistency throughout the whole policy cycle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principles, Values, Policy paradigms and Administrative cultures underpinned by integration-oriented rationale
Organisational	Vertical and horizontal coordination mechanisms ensuring synergies, complementarity and cooperation between and across political and administrative structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inter-departmental boards, task forces, coordination committees • Organisational and functional charts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative and inclusive practices and routines
Individual	Knowledge, competencies and skills facilitating actual coordination and collaborative interactions between and across levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cross-sectoral competencies and skills • Specialised training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expert knowledge, Awareness and Leadership enhancing inter-sectoral linkages and interactions

Source: Own elaboration based on NEI (2002) and Wu et al. (2015).

This framework summarises and describes a range of institutional capacity components, covering both structure- and actor-related characteristics across the political and administrative domains of governmental institutions.

At the systemic level, the creation of a comprehensive system of rules, instruments and guidance constitutes a solid normative and operational framework for cross-sectoral action, ensuring the functioning integrated patterns of policy-making irrespective of characteristics and preferences of individual actors operating within the system. Several insights concerning this dimension have been offered by the studies conceptualising ‘holistic government’ (Howlett & Ramesh, 2014), ‘boundary-spanning policy regimes’ (Jochim & May, 2010), ‘functional regulatory spaces’ (Varone et al., 2013) and policy integration instruments more in general (Jordan & Lenschow, 2010), focusing on comprehensive and coherent policy planning. Capacity studies emphasise that before creating support systems and indicators which enhance governments’ implementation and delivery capacities, normative values and principles underlying these reforms should be identified, followed by indicators for evaluation (El-Taliawi & Van Der Wal, 2019). At this level, institutional capacity can be operationalised through established systems of policy instruments, procedures and techniques, but also policy ideas and values, which bring policy-making processes towards specific patterns of consistent and coherent cross-sectoral action throughout the different phases of the policy cycle (from formulation to evaluation).

The organizational level of institutional capacity is associated with a set of institutional arrangements and procedures, which enhance interaction, coordination and synergies between individuals and units involved in a given integrated design. Clearly defined and complementary roles and functions, dedicated management and coordination schemes are at the core of this dimension. The bulk of existing studies has focused on horizontal coordination within administrations (Catalano et al., 2015), being conceptualised under the umbrella of ‘joined-up government’ (Christensen, Fimreite, & Læg Reid, 2014) and ‘whole-of-government’ (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2007). The formal aspects of this dimension have been widely scrutinised in the administrative capacity literature, whereas little knowledge exists on less commonly considered informal features, including, for example, administrative cultures, collaborative arrangements and routines (El-Taliawi & Van Der Wal, 2019).

The individual level includes individual characteristics, such as competences, skills and expertise, but also knowledge, skills and motivations of policymakers and administrators (Peters, 2015; Trein et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2015). Existing studies have developed a convincing argument about how general individual analytical, managerial and political capacities matter for effectively performing policy functions (Wu et al., 2015) and why they are important for integrated designs (Ramesh et al., 2016a). But they have not reflected on whether and to what extent these components become embedded in specific policy ideas (Bouckaert et al., 2010), expertise, education and carriers of the staff (Peters, 2015) or shared policy preferences (Nilsson & Nilsson, 2005). Being oftentimes incorporated in the research on organisational instruments (Tosun & Lang 2017), the micro dimension has been largely underexplored and further analytical efforts appear to be needed to unpack the ‘nested models of capacities involving not only a multi-level categorisation of resources and capabilities’ (Ramesh *et al.*, 2016: 8) or ‘the ability to navigate through the complexities of interconnected problems, multi-level governance, multiple fault lines’ (Parsons, 2004, p. 44).

In summary, this framework effectively captures the various elements of institutional capacity supporting both the substantive (goals, principles, values) and procedural (formal procedures, routines and practices) components of integrated policy designs (Howlett, 2011), indicating the direction in which governmental efforts should advance in order to more or less systematically develop efficient and effective [integrated] policies through the application of knowledge about policy means gained from experience, and reason, and adopt courses of action that are likely to succeed in attaining their desired goals or aims within specific policy contexts. The conditions under which the replacement of traditional policy settings with new ‘integrated policy mixes’ (Rayner & Howlett, 2009) occurs, as well as the pathways of policy and institutional change related to the consolidation of integrated designs and the underlying institutional capacities are subject to inquiry of this Thematic Issue.

Departing from different analytical angles, this collection brings together a number of original and mutually complementary contributions that elaborate on the conceptual contours of institutional capacities for integrated policy designs, deliver a variety of analytical perspectives on this subject and present an inspiring empirical overview of how specific institutional capacities matter for the design and implementation of integrated policies in different contexts.

Key findings and specific links with the conceptual framework

Collectively, the pieces proposed in this Thematic Issue contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the types of institutional capacity required for policy integration and how to foster them.

The various contributions are aimed at setting up a dialogue with the systemic, organisational and individual dimensions of institutional capacity. More specifically, Bazzan & Righettini, van der Heijden and Ferry are focusing primarily on the systemic level. The contribution by Bazzan & Righettini illustrates how and under which conditions the European Union’s member states could more or less successfully develop and customise comprehensive policy designs conducive to policy integration, as required by the EU Energy Union policy guidance. Van der Heijden describes the way in which the lack of coordination capacity in the usage of New Environmental Policy Instruments has hampered the overall coherence and effectiveness of local climate policy mixes in the three major United States cities (Chicago, New York and San Francisco). The Ferry’s analysis shows, in its turn, how the different policy coordination mechanisms within the framework of the implementation of EU cohesion policy have been shaped by a mix of context-related factors across three countries (Germany, Poland and the United Kingdom).

Rilling & Tosun primarily focus on the organizational level, explaining how local institutional equilibrium between the political and administrative domains has changed because of the need to establish cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms related to climate impact assessments in Germany.

The individual-level dynamics have been analysed by Dupont & Rietig and Trein & Maggetti. The former contribution illustrates how the leadership style of the European Union’s Commission has affected the effectiveness of climate policy integration, while the latter provides the evidence that institutional capacities can be an important

intervening factor enabling policy integration reforms, although political motivations and ideologies may play the decisive role in determining policy change and capacity-building trajectories. Domorenok *et al.* elaborate on a comprehensive administrative capacity framework and analyse policy change and capacity-building activities cutting across the three capacity levels by comparing meso-authorities in Italy and the United Kingdom.

Taken together, the articles here presented cover a range of public policies that include but also go beyond the classical focus on the environmental policy integration and mainstreaming, investigating new fields such as energy and climate change, innovation, transport, regional and urban development. This thematic breadth allows exploring the institutional capacity challenges, opportunities and dynamics of policy integration across policy settings that are characterised by a variable interplay between types of actors (supranational, national, regional and sub-regional), implementation modes and domestic policy legacies.

Second, the collection explores the dimensions of institutional capacity for policy integration from different territorial perspectives – European (Dupont & Rietig), national (Bazzan & Righettini; Ferry), regional (Domorenok *et al.*), and sub-regional (Tosun & Rilling; van der Heijden) – thus highlighting the specific institutional capacity challenges and mechanisms of policy integration horizontally and across the different territorial scales. In addition to providing an extensive comparative analysis of the different European regions, cities and countries, the Thematic Issue offers a comparative view on the experience of policy integration at the local level in the United States.

Third, the studies explicitly bring to the fore the role of agency, exploring the motivations and preferences of key policy actors, and the way in which they prevent or, on the contrary, endorse the development of integrated policy mixes and the related institutional capacities, thereby disrupting existing past policy legacies (Domorenok *et al.*, Trein & Maggetti). The contributions also highlight political (Trein & Maggetti) and managerial (Dupont & Rietig) frames that, implicitly or explicitly, inform the action of such key actors.

Lastly, each study presented in this collection is characterised by a comparative research design, whereby the evolution of selected institutional capacity dimensions for policy integration is examined either across time (Dupont & Rietig; Trein & Maggetti), space (Ferry; Righettini & Bazzan; Tosun & Rilling) or both dimensions (Domorenok *et al.*; van der Heijden).

All contributions are based on fresh empirical investigations and data. In addition to contributing to existing knowledge about how specific dimensions of institutional capacity matter for the design and implementation of integrated policies in different contexts, this Thematic Issue provides a number of useful practical insights that may inform not only on the study but also the practice of integrated policy designs. Although the empirical focus is mainly on the European context, our findings offer insights on how policy dynamics in complex multi-level and multi-actor governance contexts connect with wider transnational processes that force practitioners and academics to better explore the potential of integrated policy designs and reflect on the institutional capacities required for their success.

Towards a new research Agenda?

Conceptualising a causal link between institutional capacity and policy integration has been one of the main points shared by all the authors of this Thematic Issue. The results reached by the individual contributions allow us to advance our knowledge in terms of how institutional capacity matters for policy integration. And it does so in five main directions.

First, the articles demonstrate the heuristic relevance of the notion of institutional capacity: although each article focuses primarily on one specific dimension (systemic, organizational or individual), all the contributions suggest that institutional capacity dimensions need to be considered together in order to fully grasp what is needed to guarantee policy integration – which quite often means *effective* policy integration. Therefore, future studies should consider analytically all three dimensions of institutional capacity in order to shed new light on the ways through which the various components interact and reinforce each other. With this regards, specific research hypotheses could be developed in order to verify if a hierarchy of dimensions exists or all dimensions are both necessary and sufficient conditions that have to be met in order for policy integration to occur. The findings reached by the authors of the contributions hosted in this Thematic Issue do not allow such multiple hypotheses testing since they are primarily aimed at understanding the relevance of *one* specific factor or institutional capacity dimension determining policy integration and do not truly control for other possible explanations. Future research designs should cover a large-N in order to model and test specific hypotheses connected to all three dimensions of institutional capacity.

Second, the formal component of institutional capacity at the systemic level has been thoroughly unpacked and scrutinised in this Thematic Issue, whereas the informal aspects comprised in this domain remain somewhat underexplored. Although large-N studies may identify and operationalise variables connected to this analytical dimension, we argue that more small-N qualitative in-depth studies may allow us to better understand how the systemic level may influence policy integration. For example, *prima facie*, arguments could be made in favour of new public governance approaches with reference to its policy integration potential – and its capacity to create a favourable *administrative culture or styles* to effectiveness and accountability. Nevertheless, more nuanced theoretical reflections are needed in order to fully understand how such *public administration styles* may impact policy integration. Empirically, comparing a limited number of cases (at the national or local level) which are characterised by different *policy styles* derived from public administration traditions could be a promising venue to see how a specific macro dimension is conducive to policy integration.

Third, one of the most transversal explanatory institutional capacity dimensions seems to be the individual one, especially associated with the *leadership, knowledge and ideological components*. Although with different nuances, several articles presented in this Thematic Issue conclude that the individual characteristics of top decision-makers are crucial to understand the adoption of policy integration measures and more broadly policy effectiveness. For example, both the contributions by Dupont & Rietig and Domorenok et al. prove the importance of policy entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the contribution by Trein & Maggetti focuses – although somewhat indirectly – on the impact of political leaders' party ideology on policy integration. Put differently, the role

of *personal skills* and (party) *ideas* reflected in individual actions seems to hold a high explanatory potential in terms of policy integration development. Future research should be even more specifically designed in order to test such leadership/ideational hypotheses, and with this regard, both small-N and large-N studies could be very useful in developing this specific research agenda strand. Furthermore, behavioural and experimental research designs could be particularly promising for the understanding of the mechanisms through which personal skills and ideas become crucial in triggering policy integration (maybe, for example, giving birth to solid favourable coalitions which are kept together by strong leaders and/or powerful ideas if not proper ideologies).

Fourth, the reach of institutional capacity should be considered. Put differently, is policy integration always conducive to policy effectiveness? And what are the direct links between institutional capacity and policy effectiveness? With this regard, the understanding of specific policy patterns (and meanings) of policy integration could benefit from more focused research. Although with this respect a solid research record is already available, it would be quite useful to understand what is the *degree* of policy integration needed by different policy sectors in order to better achieve policy results. For this purpose, the key unit of observation would be the policy sector and comparative research design should focus on the link between policy integration and policy effectiveness which often are taken as synonymous. Problematising the relationship between the two notions could be particularly useful also for the study of institutional capacities, since it would allow the better understanding of the link between institutional capacity, policy integration and policy effectiveness, since – theoretically – we could consider a direct impact of institutional capacity on policy effectiveness, also in cases of limited policy integration. Clearly, for this purpose, a sophisticated theoretical argument would need to be developed, but more solid analytical distinctions could allow for greater insights into the overall reach of institutional capacity.

Fifth, although not central in the analytical framework nor in most contributions, one relevant aspect to be further researched regards *multilevel institutional capacity*. With this regard, the possible research questions are linked to the ways through which multilevel governance systems are capable of addressing institutional capacities at various levels of government. Partially, at least in the field of European studies, this research topic has been covered by the Europeanization literature, in particular with the ‘goodness of fit’ hypothesis (Graziano, 2011). But beyond European studies (and beyond research questions aimed at understanding policy change and not the impact of institutional capacity on policy integration), research is still needed in order to fully account for the institutional capacity potential of multilevel organisations which develop specific capacity-building agendas, such as the United Nations. The point of departure of this line of thought is that multilevel organisations may display uneven institutional capacities and therefore the impact on policy integration should carefully consider such aspect. Put differently, in this strand of research, questions regarding policy designs capable of assessing, understanding and possibly overcoming multilevel institutional capacity gaps? Become of vital importance – both for analytical and normative purposes.

In sum, from an analytical perspective, we do think that this Thematic Issue – and the analytical framework presented in this contribution – has provided quite useful for a number of reasons. First, it has demonstrated the relevance of the notion of institutional capacity and its link with policy integration. Furthermore, it has offered

a comparative perspective on policy areas that have been considered only to a limited extent since the main focus of most of the contributions on policy integration so far has been environmental policy. Finally, given the multiple institutional layers considered in the various contributions, we offered multilevel insights on the topic and provided findings of how institutional capacities may be relevant to all levels of government – supranational, national and local.

Recommendations for practitioners

The contributions in this Theme Issue tackle the interrelation between institutional capacities and integrated policy design from a variety of perspectives and policies. They deal with transboundary policies (e.g. climate change, regional and urban development) from a variety of perspectives on policy integration (organisational reforms, coordination mechanisms or architectures, leadership styles, and policy instruments). By examining institutional capacity challenges for policy integration along both vertical (across levels of government) and horizontal directions (across policy fields), the articles composing this Theme Issue unveil specific challenges, drivers and barriers in the process of consolidation of institutional capacities for integrated policy designs. While the pieces do not draw explicitly policy recommendations for practitioners, they do allow distilling useful lessons related to each dimension of institutional capacity as conceptualised in Table 1.

At the individual level, the articles in this collection highlight the important *connection between integrated policy design and individual political commitment to policy integration*, be it in terms of political ideologies of governing parties (Trein & Maggetti), which might be more or less inclined towards policy integration, or in terms of management and leadership styles (Dupont & Rietig; Domorenok *et al.*). As discussed, achieving policy integration entails breaking entrenched silo mentalities within public administrations and path-dependent features of policymaking (Tosun & Rilling). This, in turn, requires political commitment and political action. Yet, integration is a long-term game which does not always match the shorter-term lives and ambitions of governments. As shown by Maggetti & Trein's analysis of integration reforms in the UK over the past half a century, high frequency of government alternation and policy reforms may 'lead to policy incoherence and even disintegration' (Maggetti & Trein), with harmful consequences in relation to both integration and impact. Therefore, a *first policy recommendation* that can be drawn from the studies in this collection is thus that ensuring the resilience of policy integration goals, mechanisms and tools beyond the life of a given government or governing coalition requires couching these goals, mechanisms and tools within the framework of cross-partisan (i.e. institutionally embedded) agreements.

To be sure, while different governments might have diverse ideological positions vis-à-vis policy integration, a reduced emphasis on policy integration might simply be the outcome of shifting priorities, rather than the result of an explicit aversion to this goal. Even declared political commitment may become difficult to sustain if circumstances change (Dupont & Rietig). External shocks, like the 2008 economic crisis (Trein & Maggetti; Dupont & Rietig) or the more recent Covid-19 pandemic (Tosun & Rilling) can play a part in this, as can policy paradigm shift (Ferry). Against this background, the sustained commitment of bureaucracies to policy integration might prove essential

to the continued pursuit of an integrationist agenda after the mandate of a supportive government has ended or after policy priorities have changed due to exogenous shocks or policy reframing. Given that organisational structures are generally less easy to dismantle than policy strategies, creating a governance architecture that is conducive to policy integration might be an effective way to sustain such commitment after government priorities have shifted. A *second policy recommendation* is thus that to ensure the necessary long-term resilience of policy integration agendas, policy integration reforms should not be limited to spelling-out integration goals and the related targets, but they should include the targeted transformation of organisational structures (meso level), such as the reorganisation of government departments across cross-cutting policy competences, and the creation and long-term funding of cross-sectoral bodies and groups.

At the same time, organizational structures might become empty vessels if they are not coherent with the existing institutional context (Ferry; Bazzan and Righettini), if they do not consider the overall workload of public servants (Bazzan & Righettini) and if the work that is required of civil servants is not in tune with their motivations (Domorenok *et al.*). Policy integration agendas should foresee *dedicated awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives* aimed, on the one hand, at generating a cultural shift among public servants and, on the other hand, at creating the skills that are needed for cross-sectoral policy design and implementation, such as negotiation skills, team-work, participatory policy design techniques. Yet, capacity-building and awareness-raising initiative's risk being toothless if they are not accompanied by a degree of cogency. A *third recommendation*, therefore, relates to the resilience of the aforementioned awareness-raising and capacity-building outcomes. To achieve and also sustain the necessary cultural shift and foster a virtuous and self-sustaining capacity-building cycle, awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives aimed at policy integration should be tied to *more encompassing administrative reforms and linked to the performance assessment of public servants*.

Related to the above, it is essential to *include policy integration outcomes in the standard monitoring* of outcomes of policies and of administrative reforms. Only by monitoring the progress towards policy integration and its implementation in practice can policymakers embed learning into the policy process and generate the understanding that is needed to identify where the integration chain might stop and which actions might be needed to address the kind of bottlenecks discussed in van der Heijden and Domorenok *et al.*'s pieces.

And lastly, at the individual level, the research presented in this collection emphasizes the important role that policy actors can play within the public administration in relation to the pursuit and operationalization of policy integration (Dupont & Rietig; Domorenok *et al.*). Political and administrative leaders should recognize this and adopt leadership styles that 'foster openness and opportunities for policy entrepreneurs at lower levels to pursue potentially innovative integrative proposals' (Dupont & Rietig) and their actual implementation.

Table 2, below, provides a summary of these policy recommendations, highlighting the level of applicability according to our analytical framework – systemic, organisational and individual.

Table 2. Policy recommendations arising from the articles in this collection.

Level	Policy recommendations
Systemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring the resilience of policy integration goals, mechanisms and tools beyond the life of a given government or governing coalition requires couching these goals, mechanisms and tools within the framework of cross-partisan agreements. • To achieve and sustain the necessary cultural shift and foster a virtuous and self-sustaining capacity-building cycle, awareness-raising and capacity-building initiatives aimed at policy integration should be tied to wider administrative reforms and linked to the performance assessment and reward mechanisms of civil servants. • Monitoring systems targeting policy process and outcomes should be included in the standard operation modes. This is essential for identifying where the integration chains break and which actions are needed to address bottlenecks and shortcomings
Organisational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To assure the long-term resilience of policy integration agendas, policy integration reforms should not be limited to spelling-out integration goals and the related targets. Instead, they should include the targeted transformation of organisational structures, such as the reorganisation of government departments across cross-cutting policy competences and the creation and funding of cross-sectoral bodies and groups.
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political and administrative leaders should recognise the important role of policy entrepreneurs and adopt leadership styles that foster openness and opportunities for policy entrepreneurs at lower levels to pursue innovative integrative actions. • Policy integration agendas should foresee dedicated awareness-raising, learning and capacity-building initiatives aimed, on the one hand, at generating a cultural shift among public servants and, on the other hand, at creating the skills that are needed for cross-sectoral policy design and implementation, such as negotiation skills, team-work, participatory policy design techniques, etc.

Source: Own elaboration.

Disclosure statement

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