Drawing conclusions from facilitated MCDA interventions in a public policy context

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In practical decision contexts of public policy formation such as strategy development, priority setting and resource allocation, decisions usually involve many - often intangible - objectives and several actors with different views and values. Facilitated modelling drawing on methodologies of multiple criteria decision analysis (MCDA) seems to be a promising tool for decision-aid in such contexts.
However, the application of facilitated MCDA in public policy contexts also faces challenges, which are based on the special conditions under which public policy formation takes place, such as the multi-level governance system in which policies are often embedded or the long time periods during which policy decisions can evolve despite short term time pressure on decision-makers.

Although there is an increasing number of case-studies reported in the literature, the conditions relevant for practical MCDA interventions in public policy contexts are seldom mentioned and further characterised. Furthermore, little systematic evidence is given on the actual impacts of such conditions on the outcome of the MCDA interventions. To increase the success of MCDA interventions in public policy contexts, it would be useful to further specify conditions that can be found in practice and the resulting consequences for the scope and design of future studies. However, respective frameworks for systemising respective research on MCDA practice are missing. Therefore, this contribution will outline tentative approaches that could provide such a framework.

This contribution starts with reviewing experiences of MCDA applications in a public policy context drawing on two own case-studies and further experiences reported in the literature. Moreover, a special focus is on concepts and frameworks from administrative sciences that could help to improve research on practical MCDA interventions: First, the definition of strategic decision making as "practice" and its consequences for conducting research on respective MCDA applications is discussed. Second, the question is raised how interpreting a MCDA application as "design problem" can contribute to improve the basis of "action research" on MCDA interventions. Second, a conceptual framework of strategic planning and management is introduced, based on Poister et al. (2010). It is discussed how such a framework could be used for better structuring results of MCDA case studies. The contribution concludes with summarising directions for further research.

Reference

Poister T.H., D.W. Pitts, L.H. Edwards (2010): Strategic Management Research in the Public Sector: A Review, Synthesis, and Future Directions. The American Review of Public Administration 40(5): 522– 545.