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# **An organisational approach to meta-governance – structuring reforms through organisational (re-)engineering**

## **Abstract**

This article outlines an organisation theory approach to meta-governance by illustrating how public organisations may organise policy change and reform by (re-)designing organisational choice-architectures. Firstly, it outlines an organisational approach to meta-governance and secondly it offers an illustrative case of meta-governance by examining how public innovation processes are shaped by organisational designs. Two arguments are proposed: (i) first that public meta-governance is an accessible tool for facilitating policy change, and (ii) second that meta-governance may be systematically biased by organisational structuring. Examining conditions for meta-governance is important since governments experience frequent criticism of existing inefficient organisational arrangements and calls for major reforms of the state. The contribution of this article is to suggest how an organisational approach to meta-governance might both explain meta-governance and make it practically relevant for solving societal challenges in the future.

**Keywords:** Organisational design; policy design; administrative reform; policy innovation; meta-governance; organisation theory; organisational re-engineering; public innovation

## **Introduction**

Times of societal ruptures and political crisis call upon public organisations to adapt, anticipate, reform and innovate. Public innovation has subsequently climbed to the top of

government agendas with ambitions to make public administration flexible and agile in the face of societal ruptures (e.g. Ansell and Torfing 2014: 3). Consequently, there is a growing body of literature on institutional absorptive capacity which tries to identify how institutions and systems respond to surprises, uncertainty and errors (Hermus et al. 2020; Schulman 2021). Studies also provide insights on how different institutional conditions enable individuals and organisations to respond to change (e.g. Castellacci and Natera 2013). Despite this, organisational factors are a frequent barrier to administrative reform (Cinar et al. 2019; De Vries et al. 2015: 157), and organisation theory might help to build a theory of meta-governance, which may also serve as a bridge between theory and practice (Selznick 1996; Stoker 2013; Trein et al. 2020). An organisational approach to meta-governance serves to link scholarship to the realities of practice, concerned not just with how things are, but how things might be (Gulick 1937; Meier 2010: 284). Given certain goals, such as innovation in public organisations, organisation designers would be capable of recommending structural solutions. Examining conditions for meta-governance is pertinent since governments experience frequent criticism of existing organisational arrangements and calls for major reforms of the state (Lodge and Wegrich 2012; Emery and Giauque 2014; Torfing et al. 2012). Responding to a call to make the design orientation in public administration and policy studies more 'designerly' (Hermus et al. 2020: 36), this article thus outlines the contours of an organisational approach to meta-governance (Cinar et al. 2019; De Vries et al. 2015; Goodin 1996; Lewis et al. 2019; Peters 2018; Romme and Meijer 2020).

The research question motivating this study is how the organisational structuring of ongoing reform processes (meta-governance) may affect decision-making behaviour within reform processes. Meta-governance encompasses deliberate attempts at governing by (re-

)organising governing structures (Egeberg and Trondal 2018; Jacobsson et al. 2015). In this study we focus on meta-governance as centred on the (re)structuring of ongoing reform processes. The illustrative example provided, based on existing literature, is on processes of policy innovation. Two arguments are made: (i) first, public meta-governance is an available tool to policy change, and (ii) meta-governance ultimately may be systematically biased by organisational structuring. Aiming to make public policy and administration scholarship available to practitioners (Gulick 1937; Pollitt 2016; Raadschelders 2013; Self 1972; Stoker 2013), this study offers an organisation theory approach to meta-governance and illustrates how public organisations may organise policy change by (re-)designing organisational choice-architectures.

Despite the rich literature on governance and organisation theory, contemporary literature has lacked a theory-based analysis of the organisational dimension of meta-governance (Peters and Pierre 2017). Whereas organisational studies have revealed the effects of organisational structures on decision-making behaviour and processes, less focus has been given to how organisational structures of reforms may affect the actual reform processes. Despite decades of studying governance and organisations, these literatures have remained largely disconnected, as illustrated by the Oxford Handbook of Governance which lacks a chapter on organisation theory (Levi-Faur 2012). This is also reflected by two decades of core-executive governance scholarship that largely has abandoned the organisational dimension (Elgie 2011). Also moving beyond a 'policy tools' literature (Howlett 2011; Howlett et al. 2018), this article outlines the contours of a theory of how organisational factors may shape meta-governance processes. In his book *The Tools of Government*, Hood (1983: 4–7) distinguishes among four basic government 'resources': 'nodality,' 'treasure,'

'authority,' and 'organization.' An organisational approach to meta-governance zooms in on the organisational dimension. It is thus argued that the relevance of organisational theory may range from understanding organisational conditions for mundane administrative reforms (Durant 2019) to organisational conditions for large-scale organisational transformations (Ansell and Lindvall 2021). Yet, our analytical model is limited to meso-level/organisational-level variables and excludes macro-level/contextual/regime-level variables which have been extensively covered elsewhere (Ansell and Lindvall 2021; Clarke and Craft 2017; Lindvall 2017). Nor does this model emphasise how meta-governance is affected by policy accumulation due to ambitious executive leaders and evolving responsiveness traps (Adam et al. 2021; Meier et al. 2019). In short, by emphasising organisational factors, our study does not exhaust causal identification of meta-governance (Lewis et al. 2020; Timeus and Gasco 2018).

Since organisational variables may be subject to direct manipulation by organisational designers, they are useful tools to change the direction of organisations by deliberate intervention (Egeberg and Trondal 2018). Yet, organisational designers are also constrained by requisite power since multiple factors might influence ordered organisational reform - such as ambiguous, shifting and competing goals, shortage of attention and capacity to monitor processes, previous conflicts that could be reopened, the stickiness of existing organisational arrangements, and the influence of shifting institutional fads and fashions (Hood and Jackson 1991; March 2008; March and Olsen 1983; Pierson 2004; Simon 1983: 83; Weick and Sutcliffe 2001). Two contributions are thus offered.

First, the study outlines the contours of an organisational approach to meta-governance – that is problem-solving through organisational engineering (meta-governance). Meta-governance encompasses activities directed towards deliberate reforms of the infrastructure of organisations—that is, the deliberate changing of organisational structures, demography and/or location. Jacobsson and colleagues (2015: 2) refers to meta-governance as ‘governance by organising, i.e., steering through organisational design’. Focus is thus on ‘manipulable variables’ in which research results can be systematically used as an intervention (Bennis 1966: 100). Taken together, this paves the way for an organisational approach to meta-governance, making it less vulnerable to shifting dogmas and ideologies (Hood and Jackson 1991), as well as showcasing the applicability of organisation theory to organisational design (Evan 1980).

Secondly, merely to illustrate the theoretical argument, the study empirically examines how public innovation processes may be organisationally biased by (i) routinisation of reform, (ii) organisational loose coupling, (iii) organised complexity, and (iv) temporal sorting. The article proceeds as follows.

The next section outlines an organisational approach to meta-governance, and this section in particular outlines what we call a short-term reform optimistic approach. This section unpacks the framework for analysis into four elements: organisational specialisation and duplication, organisational capacity, organisational ecology, and organisational temporality. The final section empirically illustrates how public innovation processers might be organisationally shaped by (i) routinisation of reform, (ii) organisational loose coupling, (iii) organised complexity, and (iv) temporal sorting.

The conclusion suggests how an organisational approach to meta-governance might both explain meta-governance and make it practically relevant for solving societal challenges.

## **Towards an organisational approach**

The role of organisations and organisational factors in meta-governance is contested in literature. March and Olsen (1983) contrasted long-term fiascos and short-term successes. Given that institutional scholarship has emphasised the study of long-term reform-pessimism (Pierson 2004), this section in particular advances the short-term reform optimistic approach.

### *Long-term reform-pessimism*

March and Olsen (1989) draw lessons from efforts in US political institutions that long-term courses of action tend to be characterised by incremental adaptation to changing problems in which pre-existing solutions tend to be applied to new problems. Organisational designers who seek to design a polity in accordance with an architectonic design and envisage themselves as polity engineers may find themselves in situations they have not envisaged when facing the many factors that constrain organisational engineering and orderly reform (Pierson 2004): the stickiness of existing organisational arrangements, institutional fads and fashions, shifting, ambiguous and competing goals, short attention-spans, limited capacity to monitor processes, and a history of previous conflict that could at any time re-emerge (e.g. March 2008; Pierson 2004). Reformers sometimes experience reorganisations mainly formalising developments that have already taken place (March and Olsen 1989: 114) or that reform processes mainly involve sense-making and meaning formation based on senses

of identity (March and Olsen 1989). The long-term development of segmented political orders fits into this picture (Bátora and Fossum 2019). It should thus be apparent that the development of political orders within a world that is dominated by nation-states is often not deliberately designed processes. The European Union was originally established to deal with deficiencies in a European system of states; how far it would develop and which challenges and deficiencies it would grapple with was a matter of profound contestation and has remained so until this day. Nevertheless, the lack of an overall design does not necessarily mean that a political order develops willy-nilly. Local and stepwise reforms, each of which being sensible, may be driven by local rationality and yet may add up to form a type of polity that nobody envisaged.

#### *Short-term reform-optimism*

March and Olsen (1989) also observed in the US political system that short-term courses of action tend to be influenced by the organisation of attention, linked to power and pre-existing resources. This article takes as a point of departure a reform-optimistic approach that focuses on deliberate intervention and change through re-design of organisational structures. This approach in particular draws on an organisational approach which emphasises how decision processes and human behavior respond to a set of fairly stable organisational routines (Cyert and March 1963). Essentially, stable premises for behavioural choices are past experiences encoded in rules and expressed in the organisational structure of a government apparatus (Olsen 2017). Organisational characteristics of meta-governance processes are thus likely to variously enable and constrain such processes, making some organisational choices more likely than others. A theory of organisation is thus also a theory of politics and design (Waldo 1952). Organisational factors mobilise attention and



action capacity around certain problems and solutions while ignoring others, focusing attention on particular lines of conflict and cooperation, and so on (Simon 1983: 21). By redesigning organisational structures, the attention structure or the choice architecture of decision-makers is systematically redirected.

An organisational approach thus departs from the short-term politics of (re)organising. Organisation theory may be helpful in understanding how different ways of *organising* reform processes may give different reform trajectories (and outcomes). Organisational factors may influence meta-governance in two ways: first, *existing* organisational structures may affect reform processes, and second, reform processes themselves may be deliberately *organised* on a temporary basis to achieve particular goals. Our discussion will privilege the latter since this has greatest *design implications*. Our focus is thus on how to organise meta-governing processes. The argument can be illustrated as follows: Concerning the enabling and constraining role of *existing* organisational structures, whether a reform process is anchored within a ministry or within an agency, or at the level of political executives or at the level of administrative civil servants, is likely to influence what kind of actors that are deemed legitimate participants, which arguments are seen as appropriate, and how problems are framed. Studies show that stakeholder groups such as external interest groups and internal trade unions tend to have stronger influence at the agency level than at the ministry level where a political (hierarchical) control is more acceptable (Egeberg and Trondal 2018). Moreover, reform processes that encompass not one, but several ministries are likely to become more complex since they usually rely on horizontal coordination mechanisms. Finally, since the ordinary governing apparatus must run everyday business

while engaging in reorganisation, one additional question is also how much requisite capacity are left for the reform process (March and Olsen 1983).

An organisational approach sees reform processes as *decision-making processes* that allocate attention, resources, capabilities, roles, and identities. Secondly, reform organisations have structures, demographics, and locations that distribute rights and obligations, power and resources, and normally do so unevenly. The organisational structure of a reform is thus likely to enable and constrain the set of actors that are likely to be mobilised, the number of sequences involved, the access of affected stakeholder groups, the role of political executives, the degree of leeway for profound reform, and so on. Therefore, effects of reform organisations on the governing of reform processes are, in principle, parallel to effects of organisational structure on substantial decision-making processes (Lægreid and Roness 1999: 302).

One conventional reason for examining the effects of organisational variables in studies of public governance is that we may learn how public governance processes are organisationally orchestrated. One less conventional reason is that such variables may serve as instrumental toolkits for how public governance processes may be deliberately shaped through organisational design - hereafter termed 'meta-governance'. This is so since organisational variables are comparatively malleable and thus subject to design. The framework for analysis is thus not only a framework for *understanding* meta-governance, but also for *restructuring* such processes (see Figure 1). Departing from contemporary organisational literature, this section selects four analytical dimensions of meta-governance

and their design implications: organisational specialisation, organisational capacity, organisational ecology, and organisational temporality.

--Figure 1 about here--

### *Organisational specialisation*

Even though *political* organisations tend to engage in continuous reforms, partly due to the initiative of political executives (Brunsson and Olsen 1993), public organisations are also characterised as not very ‘changeful’ (Brunsson 2000: 163) since they involve a complex set of political and administrative actors with multiple preferences, resources and goals. The short-term reform optimistic approach assumes that despite embedded constraints, organisational characteristics of meta-governance processes are thus likely to variously enable and constrain such processes, making some organisational choices more likely than others. Reform processes may for example be organised into specialised or non-specialised structures – both vertically and horizontally. Organisational specialisation is a way of decomposing and isolating problems and solutions into autonomous parts, ‘to reduce large problems into their component parts’ (March 1994: 12) and to add systematic attention to reform. While specialised reform structures are likely to limit the access to actors and premises for choice, non-specialised structures open reform processes are more likely to open reform processes to a broader spectrum of actors and choice premises (Simon 1983: 88). One way to mobilise reform is thus to organisationally specialise meta-governance by separating ‘thinking’ and ‘acting’ into separate organisational reform sub-units. This subsection examines three such principles of organisational specialisation that also may serve as design tools: vertical and horizontal (de-)specialisation and organisational duplication.

### *Vertical specialisation and duplication*

First, *vertically specialised* reform organisations are likely to limit the access of actors from lower levels of the hierarchical chain and favour the access of organisational leaders such as political executives. This organisational structure establishes communication barriers across organisational levels and reduces information flows across the chains. By organising meta-governance processes close to the executive leadership, the potential for strategic policy-connected outputs is increased (Hustedt 2013: 209). Trondal and Kiland (2010) illustrate a such a vertically specialised reform organisation in the case of the geographical reform/relocation of government agencies. This study shows that reform trajectories reflect the organisational structuring of meta-governance processes. The organisational set-up of the particular reform was vertically specialised through a structured inclusion (and exclusion) of actors and a careful design of the reform schedule. The reform organisation was thus vertically specialised and temporally sequenced. However, this study also shows how the reform structure was complemented with a vertically non-specialised structure at a second stage of the reform cycle. This stage was characterised by a de-specialised structure that selectively invited stakeholder groups that were considered supportive to the reform. In sum this study thus illustrates how variation in the vertical specialisation of the reform process mobilised two different governance patterns at different points in time. The first stage of the meta-governing processes was vertically specialised, privileging the responsible political executive and some few top officials, as well as limiting the number of decision sequences. In effect, the reform-organisation evaluated few alternatives, few consequences, did not examine causal relationships between alternatives solutions, and minimised the inclusion of actors. The second stage of the reform process was organisationally de-

specialised and subsequently open to a vast number of shifting actors, problems and solutions. In effect, the garbage-can-like characteristics of the second stage was a consequence of the organisational design of the reform process. As will be illustrated below, garbage-can processes (and the general idea of garbage-can) are sensitive to organisational structures and thus to organisational design-thinking.

Vertical specialisation is an organisational solution that also tend to fuel sub-unit autonomy in reform organisations (Leavitt 1965: 1147). Yet, sub-unit autonomy might hinder reform implementation. This organisational dilemma has been illustrated in how governments have organised public sector innovation (PSI) labs across a spectrum of countries (Clarke and Craft 2019; Lewis et al. 2020). To illustrate, Timeus and Gasco (2018) show how the city of Barcelona has established innovation labs that are organisationally isolated from their parent organisations. This vertically specialised organisational solution has increased sub-unit reform activities in the labs and increased their capacity to explore new solutions (see below), yet it has also limited the innovation capacity in city government at large. The tendency to 'silo', or cause expertise to form in small and self-contained groups that do not communicate adequately with one another, was augmented in this case by the creation of vertically specialised reform structures such PSIs.

One organisational solution in which parent organisations may mitigate such isolation and increase the migration of innovation from organisational sub-units such as labs, is *organisational duplication*, in which the parent organisation installs compatible structures to the lab. Studies show that organisational duplication between ministries and agencies tend to increase mutual communication, coordination and influence between them (Egeberg and

Trondal 2018). One 'takeaway' implication of this discussion is that vertical specialisation of reform organisations tends to limit the set of actors and conflicts. In short, vertical specialisation reduces reform resistance and increases reform speed in meta-governance processes.

### *Horizontal specialisation*

Second, horizontal specialisation tends to mobilise decision-making myopia and blind spots, where problems and solutions outside own organisational 'turfs' are neglected or seen as illegitimate, fuzzy, and distant. Horizontal specialisation therefore is likely to increase a logic of exploitation in meta-governance processes. 'Exploitation includes such things as refinement, choice, production, efficiency, selection, implementation, execution' (March 1994: 127). One consequence is reduced inconsistencies inside reform organisations where the 'global' outlook across organisational borders is sacrificed for 'local attention' and siloisation. A similar argument goes for the specialisation of expertise in reform organisations. Christensen (2017) shows that organisations that are dominated by economists are likely to focus on market-conforming efficiency policies to a larger extent than organisations staffed with a blend of expertise. Processes of exploration within meta-governing processes are thus likely to thrive if multiple sets of expertise and skill sets are systematically organised in.

This argument suggests that horizontally *de-specialised* reform organisations are likely to mobilise multiple problems and solutions. Horizontally de-specialised structures are also likely to mobilise a logic of exploration among actors by breaking up organisational silos, blind spots and turfs. 'Exploration includes things captured by such terms as search,

variation, risk taking, experimentation, play, flexibility, discovery, and innovation' (March 1994: 237). Exploration increases the inclusion of actors and arguments in reform processes. One effect of such organisational formats might be search for novel solutions and thus increased innovation capacity. The flip side might be lack of control and oversight in decision-processes and thus a lack of exploitation (see the next section).

As argued, meta-governance processes tend to combine different principles of organisational specialisation and thereby different logics of behaviour at different stages of reform processes. One 'takeaway' design implication is that exploration in meta-governance thrives on horizontal specialisation. By contrast, increasing exploitation, and thus the likelihood of getting reform ideas through, is increased in de-specialised reform organisations.

### *Organisational capacity*

Meta-governance arguably requires requisite *organisational capacity*. Yet, literature harbors competing ideas on the effects of capacity in meta-governance processes. One idea sees meta-governance as ad-hoc events. Organisations are pictured as stable equilibrium-seeking bodies, only interrupted by sudden occasional changes. A reform pessimistic literature as outlined above advocates that institutions are 'settled, stable, and integrated' (Selznick 2015: 15) making them robust vis-à-vis their task environments. Change happens incrementally and gradually, and less as a consequence of deliberate reforms (e.g. Mahoney and Thelen 2010; March and Olsen 1989; Streek and Thelen 2005). A competing idea, as argued in this study, sees meta-governance as routine activity and subject to deliberate intervention (Brunsson and Olsen 1993). A pragmatist and reform optimistic literature thus

offer a middle ground in which organisations may both defend core values through processes of exploitation and at the same time as adapt to on-going problems through processes of exploration (Ansell 2011; Ansell et al. 2015). As also argued, this is likely to happen when meta-governance processes combine different principles of organisational specialisation and thereby different logics of behaviour.

Following a pragmatist argument, stability and change as well as exploration and exploitation might thus coexist in meta-governance processes, contingent on its organisational design (March 1981: 563). Selznick (1992: 321) suggested that mindful institutional leadership imply that the meta-governance should combine elements of change and continuity. Essential was for leaders to draw on what he calls the 'institutional character' as a source of direction. Meta-governance is thus not profoundly challenging the deeper 'personality' of the organisation, whilst at the same time adjusting to environmental demands of the day (Krygier 2012: 77). For example, reforms in certain parts of an organisation may occur parallel to stability in other parts. As argued above, this is likely to happen when reform organisations are horizontally specialised, enabling solid borders between those parts of the organisations that are subject to reform and those focusing on business-as-usual. Another way of crafting meta-governance is by routinising reform by allocating continuous attention to such processes through permanent *organisational capacities* (Brunsson and Olsen 1993). Meta-governance is thus likely to become a routine activity in the organisation and would serve as an organised and routinised 'stability' (Brunsson and Olsen 1993: 33). The routinisation of reform through organisational capacity-building may moreover safeguard the institutional character on the long term, while routinely updating the organisation at the same time (Ansell et al. 2015).



The routinising of attention to meta-governance may be crafted by establishing *permanent organisational attention* and recruiting *permanent staff* earmarked to reform. Less routinisation would be the result if reforms are structured as temporary ad-hoc organisations staffed with contracted short-term personnel (Bakker et al. 2016). Timeus and Gasco (2018) show for example how organisations may mobilise innovation capacity in meta-governance processes by establishing permanent attention to innovation through PSIs. Such labs serve as a permanent organisational capacity to initiate reforms. Timeus and Gasco (2018) show how the city government of Barcelona has overall strengthened its innovation capacity through PSIs. Routinising meta-governance through permanent structures has made it easier to initiate innovation reforms, yet not necessarily implementing them. Organisational capacities indeed routinise exploration, yet not necessarily safeguarding its execution.

The routinisation of administrative reform in nation-states are typically done by the creation of ministries and agencies for government reform (Brunsson and Olsen 1993). At the international level, the Puma committee of the OECD was originally established as a vehicle to routinise organisational reforms in the member-states (e.g. OECD 2001). Moreover, the OECD also installed implementation structures that enable reform ideas to be exploited and transposed by member-states, such as the Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI), established in 2014. The EU has also established their own implementation structure, notably by EU-level agencies, which has enhanced EU-level control on how member-states implement reforms (Egeberg and Trondal 2017). On a grand scale, democracies may be seen as an organisational capacity that routinises reforms by systematically organising partisan

opposition and policy contestation into parliaments and governments. Democracies have embedded competing claims for how the state should be structured and governed, and thereby increase states' capacity for routinised and continuous calls for reforms (Ansell 2011; Dahl 2000). As such, democracies are indeed 'changeable' due to its organisational capacity to mobilise exploration from within. One 'takeaway' design implication may thus be that meta-governance as is likely to become routine activity if requisite stand-by organisational capacities are installed.

### *Organisational ecology*

Reform processes often do not live alone. They are sometimes organised together into ecologies of reforms. They may thus intersect and feed on one another (Brunsson and Olsen 1993: 33). Small and incremental reforms are sometimes elements in large-scale reforms (Ansell 2011: 44). Moreover, reform processes at one place, or in the future, may be affected by reform processes elsewhere, or in the past. Meta-governance should thus be analysed as parts of ecologies of nested and coevolving reforms (Olsen 2010). According to an organisation theory approach, reform-organisations may be designed in ways that make them mutually interdependent. Two such designs are discussed in the following.

First, isolated reforms might be tied or designed into reform ecologies through *organisational linkages* or bridges. We may thus think of small reforms as parts of larger ecologies and thus as 'co-evolving processes' that are likely to mobilise interactive effects (March 1994: 97; Olsen 2010: 14). We may also consider large-scale reforms as not typically 'designed' per se, but as the product of smaller reforms through bridges converging into transformative change. Incremental change often has the advantage of being politically

feasible to launch. Linking small reforms into wider ecologies of ‘meta-reform’ makes it more likely that decisions made in smaller reform processes feed into one another, generating aggregated transformation. One organisational design that are likely to mobilise reform ecologies is *secondary structures* that are temporary in nature — notably collegial structures such as committees and project organisations (Bakker et al. 2016: 1705), as well as contracted personnel that serve as boundary-spanners across reform organisations. Secondary structures are temporary, niche-filling structures supplying additional problem-solving capacity to primary structures. A recent example is the Panama Canal Extension Program established to widen the capacity of the existing canal, comprising more than 10,000 employees. This reform organisation coordinated ‘multiple interrelated sub-projects’ (Marrewijk et al. 2016). Profound reform may thus be *less* challenging than assumed by reform pessimistic literature, through the accumulated effects of multiple interrelated reforms coordinated through secondary structures (e.g. Brunsson 2000: 180). Concomitantly, co-evolving reforms might combine elements of exploration and exploitation by the organisational flexibility that secondary structures allow for. In sum, secondary organisational structures serve as a design factor that may be used to create reform ecologies (Bolman and Deal 1997; Olsen 2010).

Secondly, reform ecologies are likely to emerge when meta-governance processes are organised as *non-specialised (open) structures* that increase available time and energy among reformers to be used *elsewhere*—i.e. in adjacent reform organisations. This argument suggests that *anarchic* organisational designs are likely to increase the mutual learning potential and information exchange across reform processes, which in sum is likely to foster reform ecologies. Perceptions of legitimate and efficient solutions to problems

might thus be transferred between different reform organisations. The flip side of organised exploration might, however, be loss of control over the overall reform trajectories and outcomes. Reforms in one organisation might kick into neighbouring reforms to the surprise of reform leaders. 'Good' solutions in one reform might cause problems in adjacent reforms, causing turbulence of scale (Ansell and Trondal 2017). The likelihood of this to happen arguably also increases if decision opportunities open in several reforms at the same time.

### *Organisational temporality*

Meta-governance processes require time to be initiated and executed. Time concerns factors such as speed, the number and types of tempi, and the sequencing of reforms (e.g. Ansell and Trondal 2017; Goetz 2014). Essential to our argument is that the temporal logic of meta-governance is subject to organisational design.

First, organisational factors might affect the *speed* of reform, for example, by setting tight deadlines. With increased speed comes a tendency for repetition and exploitation of past choices (March 2010). When the tempo increases in meta-governing processes, established ideas and practices are likely to be subject to test, yet pre-existing solutions are likely to be selected due to the sheer lack of time for search. High-speed meta-governance processes are thus likely to experience a tendency of repeating past successes, or what are perceived as past successes (March 2010: 16). By repeating in this way, organisations may be victims of trained incapacity to improvise—merely due to high speed of the process. In effect, up-tempo meta-governance may reduce the likelihood of exploration or improvisation—and the leeway for profound reform. Yet, this might subsequently increase the likelihood of reform implementation. Meta-governance may thus thrive if reform organisations set at

*medium speed* that balance elements of exploitation and exploration. Moreover, this argument also suggests a need for temporal diversity in meta-governance processes, in which meta-reforms includes secondary structures (e.g. project organisations such as PSI labs) that enjoy different speeds in their schedules.

Perhaps even more critical, reforms may come too late. Thus, the *timing* of reforms may be critical. This speaks to the need to organise requisite proactive capacities in organisation to anticipate the unforeseen (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001). Yet, this organisational design is most helpful when organisational challenges are in the horizon and not urgent. Following the above discussion on organisational capacity, organising for future surprises may be established by designing permanent *organisational capacities* for meta-governance that are able to provide foresight activities that may subsequently pre-empt unanticipated shocks.

Put together, these arguments highlight how organised *capacity for temporal diversity* may influence meta-governing processes. If multiple speeds are organised into reform programmes, it may enable a combination of exploitation and exploration (March 2010), continuity and change (Ansell et al. 2017), and conservative and dynamic elements (Selznick 1957). Multi-tempo meta-governance was illustrated in a two-staged reform process on the geographical relocation of government agencies (Trondal and Kiland 2010): A high-speed organisational design effectively excluded critics to the reform and kept the reform on track without too much resistance. Yet, due to the high speed of the reform process, this organisational structure favoured exploitation at the expense of exploration. This case also illustrates how the sheer number of reform sequences was subject to organisational (re)design. Different reform tempos were established at different stages of the reform

process. This case thus illustrates how large-scale reform processes incorporated multiple smaller reforms scheduled with different speeds, tempi and sequences. This was achieved through *organisational specialisation* reform which established buffers between different temporal logics in different parts of the reform-organisation.

The level of resistance and the mobilisation of opposition to a reform may also be influenced by the temporal structuring of the reform. Arguably, the mobilisation of opposition to reforms is likely to be reduced if the meta-governing processes have a limited *number of decision situations* and *sequences*. Assuming that each decision situation is likely to mobilise a set number of actors, limiting the sheer number of decision situations is thus likely to reduce the number of actors that may potentially mobilise against a reform (Ansell and Trondal 2017). Temporal sorting might thus be organisationally engineered across reform trajectories. As illustrated in the case above, whereas one part of the reform was tightly structured and dominated by logics of exploitation, the second sequence was organisationally de-specialised, loosely coupled and open to exploration among the involved actors.

In sum, the above discussion suggests four analytical dimensions of meta-governance and their design implications: organisational specialisation, organisational capacity, organisational ecology, and organisational temporality. The next section aims to illustrate the argument on public sector innovation processes.

## **An empirical illustration: Public sector innovation processes**

To illustrate the organisational approach to meta-governance, this section examines how *processes* of public innovation might be structurally designed by (i) organisational routinisation, (ii) organisational loose coupling, (iii) organised complexity, and (iv) temporal sorting. Benefits from key findings in a vast literature on PSI in general and observations from PSI labs and project groups in particular, this section suggests how innovation processes are organisationally contingent (see Al-Noaimi et al. 2021). PSI labs and project groups are secondary, collegial and often nascent structures at arm's length distance from the parent (primary) organisations that moreover provide physical spaces for actors to meet and interact. Following Ansell and Torfing (2014: 5), PSI processes include change 'that either disrupt established practices or challenge the common wisdom in a certain field'. Innovation thus involves exploration and playfulness (March 1991), a logic of experimentation (Ansell and Trondal 2017), and improvisation (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001). PSI, in short, involves processes that explores re-combinations of *established* elements in new and pragmatic ways (Ansell and Torfing (2014) as well as introducing *new* elements into organisations (OECD 2017). Following Clarke and Craft (2017), this section moreover argues against optimal design literature advocating one size-fits-all recipes for public innovation processes and that PSI requires *particular* organisational designs – such as collaborative and interactive structures and processes (Torfing et al. 2012; Ansell and Torfing 2014), contracting out and getting incentives right (e.g. Christensen and Lægneid 2006; Friedman 2008; Osborne and Gaebler 1993; Torfing and Sørensen 2016), and entrepreneurial leadership styles (Bason 2014). By contrast, this section suggests that *various* organisational characteristics may spur public innovation processes. Moreover, as argued above, it is not assumed that organisational structures are subject to 'choice'. Organisational designers face

constraints of resources, institutional histories and environmental chocks and fashions (Margetts and Dunleavy 2013). Their 'relative autonomy' and their 'power to command' is therefore circumscribed (Goodin 1996: 13).

### *Organisational routinisation*

Innovation is associated to the ability of organisations to launch and implement reforms. The PSI literature has advocated that the traditional characteristics of public organisations favour stability and predictability over innovation capacity. This section provides empirical examples of how meta-governance in general and innovation processes in particular may be routinised through a variety of organisational designs.

First, routinising reforms in organisations is an organisational design that fosters the allocation continuous attention to innovation. *Organisational capacities* translate to slack resources in which reform becomes 'the new normal' that represents some kind of organisational 'stability' (Brunsson and Olsen 1993: 33). One way of routinising attention to innovation processes is to design organisational capacities and personnel earmarked to organisational reform. One often-used measure of routinising administrative reform is to establish permanent ministries and agencies responsible for government reform.

Innovation processes may also be fuelled by organising reforms into *ecologies*. As such, innovative ideas developed within one reform might spill over to adjacent reform processes and increase the sum of innovation capacity in the organisation at large. As outlined above, reform ecologies may be organisationally designed by establishing *secondary structures* such as networks among organisations to achieve what is commonly coined 'collaborative



governance' (Ansell and Torfing 2014). Studies suggest that governments see the establishment of separate administrative units (secondary structures such as public sector innovation (PSI) labs) as a tool to introduce innovation capacity without disrupting established bureaucratic structures (Bason and Carstensen 2002; Karo and Kattel 2015). A recent study by Tönurist et al. (2017) illustrates that innovation labs have become a preferred organisational platform to launch innovation processes, in part because their organisational structure at arm's length distance from the 'mother' organisation allow them to circumvent certain bureaucratic routines that are often seen as barriers to innovation. Yet, Tönurist et al. (2017) also acknowledge that innovation labs often operate in relative isolation from the primary ('parent') structure of the organisation. Similarly, Timeus and Gasco (2018) show how secondary structures establish organised capacity for innovation processes. They show that city governments increasingly strengthen capacity to meta-govern by installing secondary structures (PSI labs) to mobilise 'smart cities'. Semi-autonomous innovation labs generate autonomous ideas, experience freedom to develop unconventional solutions, report greater risk-taking, and so on. However, their study also shows that innovation labs risk becoming isolated from their parent organisation, limiting their overall impact on innovation capacity, and thus the sustainability of innovation in public organisations writ large (Lewis et al. 2020). Timeus and Gasco (2018: 1001) show that innovation labs tend to work in isolation with weak abilities to disseminate their knowledge throughout their parent organisations, and thus limiting the overall organisational innovation capacity.

Yet, innovation processes may be supported and fuelled if designed as reform ecologies.

According to the argument outlined above, one organisational design is to establish

organisational bridges between reform processes through *secondary structures*, such as reform committees and ad-hoc project organisations (Bakker et al. 2016: 1705) as well as the recruitment of contracted personnel that are involved across several reform process. In addition to routinising attention to innovation through permanent and earmarked staff, routinised attention to innovation may be organisationally installed through the routinised inclusion of adjacent ideas by *staff turn-over*. This in turn may be achieved by offering *temporary contracts* that increases overall staff mobility. Arguably, staff turn-over is likely to induce new ideas into meta-governing processes by routinising the inclusion of personnel with different educational backgrounds and different experiences. Secondary structures such as innovation labs is likely to increase staff mobility and educational differentiation. Inviting, for example, staff with a variety of skill sets is likely to reduce 'group-thinking' and increase the possibility of varied perspectives and outlooks on policy solutions. A parallel actor-oriented tool is through the mobility of staff across organisational sub-units, thereby circulating learning and innovation throughout the reform organisation (Hood 1999: 63). Routinising mobility may thus induce organisational learning capacities from one organisational unit to another, or from one organisation to the next. Secondary structures such as committees, boards and labs are likely to mobilise stakeholder groups who may provide inputs to their primary structures (Hood 1999: 64). In a recent study, Agger and Sorensen (2014) show how the establishment of committees of major, politicians and citizens resulted in a learning process in which political executives, administrators and citizens came to share similar views on city innovation.

In sum, *secondary structures* may be designed alongside *primary structures* to mobilised innovation processes alongside the mundane routines of every-day organisational life.

Moreover, the empirical examples suggest how innovation processes are routinised through a variety of organisational designs.

### *Organisational loose coupling*

Innovation processes may also be paired with ideas from garbage can theory, which emphasises fluidity and randomness in decision-making processes (Cohen et al. 1972). Following Hood (1999: 62), ‘elements of the garbage-can model might be deliberately introduced into organisational design’. Innovation processes resembles garbage can processes by involving exploration and playfulness (March 1991), a logic of experimentation (Ansell and Trondal 2017), and improvisation (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001). An organisational approach suggests that such processes may be organisationally designed in which decision situations become *deliberately ambiguous* by organising structural loose coupling of actors, problems and solutions. A tightly coupled organised system, by contrast, is likely to increase actors’ risk averse behaviour. Loose coupling of meta-governing processes is likely to increase opportunities for discretionary behaviour and leeway for actors to choose novel policy solutions. Loosely coupled structures thus is thus likely to enable a logic of exploration in meta-governance, and thus fuel processes of innovation (March 1991).

In this way, organisational structures might be designed to ‘encourage disharmony and hence dynamics, to force us to reconsider and perhaps to change the way we are doing things from time to time’ (Goodin 1996: 38-39). The abovementioned *secondary structures* are but one way to deliberately increase garbage-can elements in innovation processes – essentially by encouraging fluid participation and mobilising unclear objectives into the primary structures. Moreover, the primary structure might also be designed to increase

ambiguity and discovery – that is through *loose coupling* of those structures. Such structures are likely to mobilise a logic of exploration and innovative search among actors, to reduce the consistency and collective nature of preferences, increase the fluidity of participation, and increase trial-and-error learning (Lomi and Harrison 2012: 10).

### *Organised complexity*

Third, innovation processes may be facilitated by deliberately designing complex organisational structures which are likely to mobilise complex sets of actors, preferences, values and normative standards. The organisational approach suggests that innovation processes are likely to result from organisational structures characterised by conflicting organisational principles – in short, organised complexity. Organisations structured by competing principles provides complex choice-architecture for the actors, making them aware of multiple preferences, concerns and considerations such as political loyalty, due processes, rechstaat values, openness, transparency, participation, resilience, predictability, service quality, responsiveness, efficiency, effectiveness. Typical examples are hybrid organisational designs (Trondal 2017). Hybrid structures characteristically combine components from various organisational forms and induce ‘chaos’ in the governing process where different parts of the reform organisation are likely to mobilise rival means-ends thinking, competing concerns and adjacent normative standards. Hybrid organisations as wholes are thus rigged for innovation to a larger extent than non-hybrid structures (Ansell and Trondal 2017). Innovation labs, as outlined above, add hybridity to primary structures, and thus induces complexity to the organisational choice-structure. Organisational complexity is thus likely to mobilise a variety of skills, ideas and visions for public innovation. In the same vein, a mix of professional skills might trigger creative thinking in a similar way.

A recent study of innovation in Danish municipalities illustrates how hybrid organisational structures boosted intra-organisational conflict and dilemmas, and thus the emergence of a variety of behavioural frames. In sum, the hybrid municipal organisation provided innovation capacity to the municipal at large (Thorup 2017).

### *Temporal sorting*

Finally, innovation processes may be facilitated by (re)designing the temporality of reform processes (Ansell and Trondal 2017). Following the example above, organising multiple temporalities such as speeds into innovation processes is likely to increase the likelihood of ambiguity as to *when* actors are legitimate participants as well as what concerns are appropriate to mobilise at *what point in time*. Multi-speed or poly-rhythmic decision-making processes are arguably more likely to amplify discovery and innovation than mono-temporal processes. In addition, innovation processes might be facilitated by organising meta-governance processes is slow tempo. Slow tempo decision processes increase the likelihood that multiple actors have time to mobilise and that potential critics are activated throughout the innovation process. Slow tempo decision-making leaves more time for each actor to attend to multiple problems and solutions and thus to question pre-existing solutions.

To establish dynamic resilience and permanent capacity to innovate, organisational structures such as *bureaucracies* may also facilitate innovation processes due to their long-term horizons, their permanence, as well their ability to breakdown problems into their component parts through organisational specialisation. Permanent organisation with permanent staff recruited for life would thus arguably be more explorative and innovative than temporary organisations staffed with temporary agents. Elected political executives

with short time frames based on electoral cycles is thus likely to have shorter time for exploration compared to non-elected office holders (Meier et al. 2019). Taken together, multi-speed, slow tempo and permanent organisational capacities is likely to mobilise contrasting ideas and thus the overall likelihood of innovation in the public domain.

Innovation processes may thus be organisationally designed by structuring the temporality of such processes.

## **Conclusions**

Responding to a call to theorise the design orientation in studies of public policy and administration, this article outlines an organisation theory approach. This approach accounts for how public organisations may organise policy change and reform by (re-)designing organisational choice-architectures. Firstly, the study has outlined an organisational approach to meta-governance and secondly offering an illustrative case of meta-governance by examining how public innovation processes are shaped by organisational designs. Two arguments are proposed: (i) first that public meta-governance is an accessible tool for facilitating policy change, and (ii) second that meta-governance may be systematically biased by organisational structuring. Meta-governance arguably encompasses activities directed towards deliberate reforming the infrastructure of organisations. This refers to governance by organising, i.e., steering through organisational design. Moreover, by examining 'manipulable variables', the study has also introduced a theory that may serve to build bridges between theory and practice.

Going forwards, the study paves the way for an organisational research agenda to meta-governance and for building the theory-practice divide. Whereas science and craft have

often been mutually disregarded (Galbraith 1980), an organisational approach advocates that organisation theory as 'craft' in fact *requires* organisation theory as 'science'. As advocated already by Luther Gulick (1937), 'craft' and 'science' are complementary joint ventures, not opposing endeavours. Taken together, knowledge about *how* organisational variables affect public governance, as well as knowledge about conditions for organisational change, are indeed necessary preconditions for applying organisation theory for practical use. An organisational approach to meta-governance, it is argued, might both explain meta-governance and make it practically relevant for solving societal challenges (Bennis 1966: 97; Clarke and Craft 2019; Egeberg and Trondal 2018; Stoker 2013).

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