***"Mechanisms of Policy Stability and Change: epistemological and theoretical implications of the application of the Institutional Analysis and Development Framework to the analysis and explanation of policy dynamics"***

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## Abstract

Theoretical debate on policy dynamics in the field of policy studies has been dominated during the last years by three major approaches – the *Advocacy Coalition Framework* (ACF), the *Punctuated-Equilibrium Theory* (PET), and the *Multiple Streams* (MS) approach. Despite their acceptation, they are not exempt from weaknesses which have been frequently pointed out by scholars in the area. In this context, the author has proposed an alternative synthetic framework for the analysis of policy dynamics built on the basis of the *Institutional Analysis and Development* (IAD) framework, articulated around a number of causal mechanisms explaining policy stability and change (MPSC). This paper outlines the main elements of the MPSC framework, and explores in deep the implications of the underlying epistemological and theoretical choices implicit in it.

## I. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the theoretical debate on policy change in the field of policy studies has been dominated by three major approaches – the *Advocacy Coalition Framework* (ACF) (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; 1999; Sabatier and Weible 2007), the *Punctuated-Equilibrium Theory* (PET) (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; True, Jones, and Baumgartner 2007), and the *Multiple Streams* (MS) approach (Kingdon 1984, 1995). Though widely accepted, these reference frameworks also present a number of shortcomings which render their accounts partial and limit their applicability. In order to address such shortcomings, the author has recently proposed an alternative synthetic framework (Real-Dato 2009) built on the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of the *Institutional Analysis and Development* (IAD) framework (Kiser and Ostrom 1982, Ostrom 1990, 1999, 2005, Ostrom *et al.* 1994), identifying a number of basic mechanisms (or generative causal processes) explaining policy stability (institutionally induced positive and negative feedback) and change (endogenous change, conflict expansion, and exogenous change).

It has been suggested that, when confronting the explanation of policy dynamics, scholars make in their explanatory frameworks a number of strong epistemological and theoretical choices which they are often not conscious of (Capano 2009). Furthermore, such unawareness may be problematic, as it may hide shortcomings and incoherences

which undermine explanatory accounts built on the chosen framework. In this sense, along with presenting the basic elements of the *mechanism of policy stability and change* (MPSC) framework – in some cases, with some additions to the original formulation – this paper aims also to make explicit the epistemological and theoretical choices this framework implies.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the rationale for the framework is presented – that is, the shortcomings found in the three reference approaches to policy change, and the possibility that the IAD framework offers to deal with them. Then, the MPSC framework is introduced, paying attention to its main conceptual elements: policy space and the ideal-type mechanisms of policy stability and change. Finally, taking as a reference the different dimensions identified by Capano (2009), the theoretical and epistemological choices implied by the framework are examined.

## II. Shortcomings in the MS, ACF, and PET

One feature that characterizes the three reference frameworks and that clearly differentiates them from other approaches in the study of the policy process – i.e., the stages-heuristics model – is their commitment with true causal explanations (Sabatier 1999). Besides, despite their differences (Real-Dato 2009, 118-119) the MS, the ACF, and the PET share a number of common elements (a feature that facilitates their further integration in a synthetic framework): the subsystem – defined here as the decisional system formed by the interactions of the set of actors interested in a policy issue or problem and the set of rules regulating those interactions – is considered as the basic unit of analysis; explanations are based on the behaviour of rational-bounded actors who interact within the subsystem's boundaries; and the emphasis on the causal role played by ideational factors (that is, actors' interpretations, ideas, and beliefs about public policies).

Despite their wide acceptance, a number of criticisms have been raised concerning these three reference approaches.[1] These shortcomings can be grouped in three main types of arguments[2]: A) the *incompleteness of the generative causal processes* they identify; B) their *limited explanatory scope*; and C) *the problem of the explanandum*.

The first category includes three major 'blind spots': 1) the *scarce attention* the three lenses pay to *microlevel processes*, mostly concerning the issue of how policy participants deal with collective action and coordination problems that unavoidably appear (Schlager 1995, 1999, 2007; Schlager and Blomquist 1996)[3]; 2) the *insufficient specification of the role of institutions* – here understood as "humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction" (North 1990, 3), including (formal and

[1] For criticisms on one or more of these frameworks see for example Hajer 1995, Hann 1995, John 1998, 2003, Mintron and Vergari 1996, Mucciaroni 1992, Schlager 1995, 1999, 2007, Schlager and Blomquist 1996, Sabatier 1999, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999, Zahariadis 1995,1999.

[2] A more detailed account of these shortcomings can be found in Real-Dato (2009).

[3] Only the ACF – after being its first versions target of major criticisms (Schlager 1995; 1999; Schlager and Blomquist 1996) – has dealt with the problems of collective action and coordination in advocacy coalitions in subsequent revisions, centred on the key role played by policy core beliefs (Zafonte and Sabatier 1998; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999; Weible 2005; Weible and Sabatier 2005; Sabatier and Weible 2007).

informal) rules and norms[4] – offering a very limited treatment of the institutional constraints which shape participants' behaviour in the policy process (Real-Dato 2009, 119-120); [5] and 3) the weak theoretical articulation of *boundary relationships*, that is, the relationships between the policy subsystem and its environment (which includes other subsystems). The later is a criticism that has usually been neglected by the literature, but of most importance, since the three reference approaches consider environmental factors (institutions and other actors outside the policy subsystem) as key elements in explaining substantive policy change. In this sense, how exogenous factors influence dynamics within the subsystem has largely been left unspecified.[6] This fact has recently been acknowledged by one of the proponents of the ACF, who assert that

> (w)hile the ACF conceives of subsystems as operating alongside, or in parallel with other subsystems, we argue here that further theoretical specification of the interactions among *linked subsystems* is necessary to make sense of the systematic patterns by which such linkages constitute positive and negative feedback for policy change. The meso-level (i.e., individual subsystem) analysis characteristic of ACF scholarship has militated against the modeling of macro-level interactions between subsystems that may influence both subsystem and coalition composition and offer important insights into policy change more generally. (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009, 37-38; emphasis in the original) [7]

Besides, boundary relationships also refer to the interactions among specialised decisional sub-units within the subsystem. The study of the interactions between these sub-units has also been ignored by the three reference approaches – with the exception of the treatment of the ACF of overlapping subsystems (Zafonte and Sabatier 1998).

The criticisms underlining the *limited explanatory scope* of the three reference lenses refer to their tendency to privilege a particular causal path of policy change (John 2003), which reduces their ability to cope with the complexity the inherent complexity of policy dynamics (Real-Dato 2009, 121). Thus, the MS framework privileges in the

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[4] Both concepts are respectively defined by Ostrom (1999, 37) as "shared prescriptions (must, must not, or may) that are mutually understood and predictable enforced in particular situations by agents responsible for monitoring conduct and for imposing sanctions" (rules) and "shared prescriptions that tend to be enforced by the participants themselves through internally and externally imposed costs and inducements" (norms).

[5] Thus, the MS treat institutions as part of the political environment along with other structural (non agencial) factors such as personal turnover or focusing events. In its turn, in the ACF, institutions appeared in the first versions conceived either in an organizational sense (as targets of the coalitions' strategic behaviour) (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1999, 142), the role of institutional settings (*fora*) as facilitators of policy-oriented learning, or as contextual elements affecting policy change (i.e. changes in constitutions). This factor seems to have advanced its status in the most recent version of the ACF,through introducing the influence of the institutional opportunity structure in coalition behaviour (Sabatier and Weible 2007), although a more detailed treatment is still needed. Finally, despite institutions are more important than in the other frameworks, there is also a need in the PET for a more detailed treatment (i.e. being more precise on how institutional structures affect the receptivity of policy images, the formation of alliances, or the impact of exogenous factors on the policy subsystem). Recent versions of the PET mainly concentrate on the role of institutions as factors affecting systemic information processing (Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Workman, Jones, and Jochim 2009, 75-76, 79ff.).

[6] For instance, the PET did not fully explain how and why actors in favourable external policy venues were attracted as allies in the process of conflict expansion. The account based on the attention shift resulting from image redefinition given by Baumgartner and Jones requires to be complemented by an explanation of how redefined policy images influence external actors' incentives to get involved in previously unattractive policy issues.

[7] This is also acknowledged in Weible, Sabatier and McQueeen (2009, 129).

explanation environmental factors outside the policy subsystem over other causal vectors, such as policy entrepreneurs' strategic behaviour or policy learning, while the PET emphasises conflict expansion outside the subsystem by active policy entrepreneurs as a main causal driver for substantive policy change. In contrast, despite in their first versions the ACF identified two major causal paths (learning and external shocks), subsequent revisions have introduced other paths to major policy change, such as internal subsystem events or shocks, and negotiated agreement among coalitions (Sabatier and Weible 2007, 191; Weible, Sabatier and McQueen 2009, 124).

Finally, there is *the explanandum problem* – what changes when policy changes. Each of the three reference frameworks deals with it differently. The ACF links policy change to changes in the dominant coalition's beliefs, while the MS and the PET focus on changes in the decisional agenda and the level of policy production. These views of the explanandum are problematic. On the one hand, mediating between beliefs and the content of policy programmes are a number of institutional structures and strategic dynamics (Schlager 1999, 252), so policy designs may not fully reflect policy beliefs. Similarly, changes in the agenda do not necessarily correspond to the policy programmes actually implemented (John 2003, 489; Hayes 2001, 96).

## III. Dealing with the problems: the IAD framework as a basis of a synthetic explanatory framework of policy dynamics

Dominance in the policy studies field of these frameworks confirms their character as major advances in the study and explanation of policy dynamics. Besides, along years, scholars applying them have tried to cope with problems as they appeared.[8] In the case of the ACF, this strategy has mainly led to incorporate some elements similar to other present in the other frameworks (i.e. the importance of policy entrepreneurs and public opinion as a determinant of the expansion of the issue beyond the subsystem's boundaries – Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009).[9] Taking this trend one step further, an alternative strategy to overcome those problems is to build a more comprehensive framework, which profits from the main advances of these three reference approaches, and allow their shortcomings to be amended. This is the option followed by the author (Real-Dato 2009).

The proposed synthesis takes Ostrom and associates' Institutional Analysis and Development framework (IAD) (Kiser and Ostrom 1982, Ostrom 1990, 1999, 2005,

[8] To be specific, this assertion mainly applies to the ACF, which its advocates have consciously assumed the *in progress* character of the framework (see, for example, the subsequent theoretical revisions experienced since the first versions in the late 1980s mentioned above). In contrast, the MS has experienced much less progress, maybe because of the less "entrepreneurial" stance of Kingdon compared with their counterparts in the other frameworks, which resulted in much less scholars explicitly applying the MS (on this point see Zahariadis 2007, 80). Concerning the PET, it has experienced a notable mutation from its origins (Jones and Baumgartner 2005), being transformed – according to their proponents – in a "much broader theory of the policy process" (Workman, Jones, and Jochim 2009, 75) – and, in the opinion of the author, much vaguer – based on the dynamics of attention and information processing.

[9] In fact, Jones and Jenkins-Smith acknowledge their debt with the PET, although they qualify this by also underlining the differences (2009, 54, n. 7).

Ostrom *et al.* 1994) as a theoretic-conceptual baseline which allows the above mentioned problems to be overcome. Its elements appear in table 1 summarized.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

These elements constitute the conceptual skeleton for the MPSC framework. As in the reference approaches, the policy subsystem (figure 1) occupies here a central position. In the IAD terms, the policy subsystem would be an action arena where actively interested actors in a problem or policy (*participants*) interact in order to influence implementation, day-to-day decisions (*operational level*) and/or policy designs (*collective choice level*). Participants are classified in three main categories: public agents (including decision-makers and implementing personnel), insiders (non-public actors and organizations with access to the decisional core of the subsystem) and outsiders (actors and organizations with limited access to the decisional core). In this respect, the IAD framework allows the researcher to deal with *microlevel processes* (as policy dynamics as a result of the interactions among participants in a particular action situation) and *to better specify the role of institutional elements*, including formal and informal rules and norms affecting the action situation.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Using the IAD framework as a conceptual baseline has also the advantage of dealing with the question of *boundary relationships*, as it pays attention to the links existing between action arenas (Ostrom 2005, 57ff.). When such relationships are considered, the MPSC framework proposes a change in the scope of the unit of analysis, from the policy subsystem to a wider *policy space*, which is defined as *the analytic whole formed by related action arenas which influence in a relevant way the final result of the considered policy process* (Real-Dato 2009, 123).[10] In situations when a subsystem is autonomous and can keep to a great extent isolated from environmental influences (which is usually related to policy stability, see below), *the limits of the policy subsystem coincide with the analytical policy space*. However, such isolation – even in policy monopolies (Baumgartner and Jones 1993), subsystems where rules exclude completely outsiders from decisions – is never complete. Firstly, changes in external factors affecting the subsystem (*material conditions* and the *attributes of the community*) may affect its internal configuration. Despite in situations of stability they may be considered as given constants in the working of the action arena, subsystem's results may affect these factors (see dotted feedback lines in figure 1) or they may change with independence from the subsystem's dynamics. Secondly, apart from material conditions and the attributes of the community, there is also the phenomenon of *subsystem permeability* – that is, the transmission of environmental influences into the subsystem through the existing connections between the subsystem and other action arenas. In these circumstances, the *limits of the analytical policy spaces expand beyond the subsystem boundaries to include other relevant action arenas*.

[10] In contrast with other concepts such as that of 'policy domain' (Burstein 1991, 328) the *policy space* one is not based on substantive criteria, but on the analytic relevance of the boundary relationships between elements in the subsystem and the environment.

Such relationships between subsystems may be of two types: *vertical* (hierarchical) and horizontal (non-hierarchical) (Real-Dato 2009, 125-126). The former involve institutionally regulated hierarchical relationships between subsystems (i.e. if the subsystem elements are regulated by rules made in external action arenas) or their participants (i.e. if they belong to organizations which also function in other action arenas). Horizontal relationships – which do not involve such a hierarchical-institutional component – may be based on *functional interdependencies* affecting both/either the subsystem as a whole and/or to specific participants (who overlap in both action arenas); or on *homomorphisms* (structural similarities) between action arenas. In both cases, processes of horizontal permeability between subsystems depend on participants' cognitive predisposition and ability to interpret information signals in order to further their policy preferences and goals (which, obviously, is greater in the case of functional interdependencies, as results in other subsystems have a direct, material, effect on participants in other related subsystems). In the same line of reasoning, Jones and Jenkins-Smith, in their attempt to incorporate 'trans-subsystem dynamics' (a term conceptually equivalent to that of 'boundary relationships' used here) into the ACF framework, attribute an important role to policy entrepreneurs and their ability to use information produced in other subsystems (spillover effects) in order to get advantage in policy advocacy using those signals to create previously unused arguments drawn from other subsystem (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009, 42).[11] However, they do not take into account other elements that may activate boundary relationships, such as the hierarchical-institutional relationship above mentioned, or the different situations that entail functional interdependencies or the mere strategic use of structural similarities.

Along with enabling the analysis of generative causal process in a greater detail, using the IAD framework as a baseline also helps to solve *the problem of the explanandum*. Ultimately, the IAD focus on the outputs resulting from the processes of interaction taking place in the action arenas. In a policy subsystem, at the decision-making level, one of these outcomes is policy designs (see figure 1). These are defined as "observable phenomena found in statutes, administrative guidelines, court decrees, programs, and even the practices and procedures of street level case workers as they interact with policy recipients" (Schneider and Ingram 1997, 2). In this respect, policy change may be assessed by analysing the variations along time of their various empirically observable components – goals, target populations, agents and implementation structures, instruments, rules, rationales and assumptions (Schneider and Ingram 1997, 81-100).

## IV. Explaining policy dynamics: mechanisms of policy stability and change

Concerning the problem of the limited explanatory scope of the three reference approaches, it has been previously shown how each of them privileged different but not incompatible causal explanatory paths of policy change. Putting them together, the three reference approaches offer evidence that policy dynamics are driven by a multiplicity of

[11] For Jones and Jenkins-Smith, spillover effects mainly transmit through the links between policy entrepreneurs in different subsystems, although in a footnote they acknowledge that no direct contact is not required (Jones and Jenkins-Smith 2009, 54-55, note 9).

contingent and complex causal paths.[12] Such paths are conceived here as *mechanisms*, in the sense of generative causal processes (Goldthorpe 2001). Previously, the author had considered only the three ideal-type mechanisms associated with policy change (*endogenous change*, *conflict expansion*, and *exogenous impacts*) which, in the practice, may combine and interact, resulting complex sequences of events leading to policy change. Along with them, this paper also identifies two more mechanisms explaining policy stability (*institutionally induced positive and negative feedback*). These will be the first to be dealt with.

### *1. Mechanisms of policy stability: institutionally induced negative and positive feedback*

According to the reference approaches (mainly the ACF and the PET), policy stability in policy designs is here associated with two mechanisms. The first one is a *negative feedback* mechanism (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2002). Policy designs, as well as the institutional structure regulating the working of the subsystem, usually reflect the interests of the dominant actors and/or coalitions of actors (Shepsle 1979; Moe 1990; 2006). Subsystem's rules contribute to reinforce such dominant position by granting participants occupying the decisional core (usually state agents and insiders) control over policy design and implementation. Thus, rules regulate access to the subsystem, establish which results are permitted or prohibited, and distribute unevenly among participants positions, information, alternatives for action, control over decision-making and veto points, and benefits. Besides, according to the PET, this *institutional design* is usually legitimated by positive *policy image* (which includes the rationales behind the policy design) connected to widely accepted social and political values. In this context, policy designs remain stable unless dominant actors consider necessary to proceed to change (usually through endogenous change).

The other mechanism which ensures policy stability is called here *positive feedback* (Pierson 2004). In this mechanism, the acceptation and enforcement of policy designs and policy legitimating images stabilise the incentive structure of the subsystem (action arena), forcing current and future participants, as well as target populations to adapt their strategies to such structure and to accept current policy designs. Besides, as time goes by, sunk costs (particularly, if participant's adaptation requires periodical reinvestments), the gains from the status quo (above all, if these are of the increasing returns type), the uncertainty of future benefits in case policy change and the costs of surmounting the negative feedback mechanism protecting the status quo, reinforce the institutional consensus. Also, along time, socialisation within this institutional structure may also shape the preferences of those participants (March and Olsen 1984, 739-740), and rules be incorporated as part of their identity (core beliefs, in the ACF terminology).

### *2. Mechanisms of policy change: endogenous change*

When (some or all) policy participants in a subsystem perceive that their actual or expected payoffs deteriorate as a consequence of a malfunction in one or more

[12] This has also been understood by other authors. For example, Barzelay (Barzelay 2003; Barzelay and Gallego 2006) in his 'institutional processualist' framework for the analysis of public management policy reform combine Kindon's MS with PET and organizational learning theory.

components of the policy design (i.e. because they fail to adapt to changes in the attributes of the community or biophysical conditions affecting the subsystem) one of the alternatives they have is to try to reverse the situation by promoting endogenous policy change.[13] [14] Then, endogenous change would be a resultant of a cognitive process, whereby participants become aware of the need to change policy, as a result of the processing and evaluation of incoming information. Such information, it may originate in different sources (figure 2): policy results, subsystem's environmental conditions (material and community attributes) and other arenas.

The easier option is to check this incoming information against to the knowledge stored in causal theories of current policy designs. In case malfunctions are detected, those causal theories may also provide possible solutions. If they are unavailable or prove to be ineffective, a second option is *imitation*, that is, to search and import causal theories or recipes which may have worked outside the subsystem (i.e. from other structurally similar subsystems). A third alternative – more costly than the former – is rethinking and re-elaborating the theories underlying the policy design within the subsystem, using available information from within or outside the subsystem. These two later alternatives involve a process of *learning* (defined as the *elaboration of new policy usable knowledge* – Fiol and Lyles 1985). The difference is that, in the first, proper learning takes place outside the subsystem, while in the second, learning occurs within the subsystem.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

In this sense, usable knowledge may be produced in a variety of settings, ranging from individual actors, organizations to the policy subsystem as a whole (Bennet and Howlett 1992; Adams 2004), both at the operative and collective choice levels of action (Figure 2).[15] The institutional environment affecting individuals and organizations influences in the process of information processing and knowledge production. Information rules influence how informational inputs produced, distributed, stored within an organization, even how they are interpreted and transformed into usable knowledge (Ostrom 2005, 206). Thus, learning is more likely if there are institutional elements (within organizations or at the subsystem level) designed to foster it – i.e. internal or external evaluations, consultative bodies, professional *fora*, information systems integrated in policy implementation procedures, etc. Along with institutions, learning is influenced by other elements in the action arena, such as biophysical

[13] Along with this 'voice' alternative, there are two other logical options for participants which perceive organizational (policy) deterioration: exit and loyalty (Hirschman 1970). In the case of public policies, exit may be not possible. The choice between voice (promoting policy change) and loyalty (maintaining the *status quo*) may depend on the costs-benefit calculus (in case the actors behave according with a 'logic of the expected consequences') or on elements related to the participants' identity ('logic of appropriateness') (March and Olsen 1984, 1989) – so the *loyalty* option may be a direct result of the positive feedback mechanism of policy stability above mentioned. In any case, which logic prevails is an empirical, open question.

[14] Since subsystem's autonomy implies stability in participants' resources and positions, this mechanism excludes those changes resulting from alterations in the participants' bargaining power, since subsystem's autonomy implies stability in participants' resources and positions. These would better be included in the conflict expansion mechanism.

[15] For a more complete treatment of the production of usable knowledge by individuals and organizations, see Real-Dato 2009, 128-129.

conditions (technical uncertainties and complexity in the environment may promote a pro-learning stance – Haas 1992) or the attributes of the community (social constructions of issues or the organizational culture may frame and bias the selection of information and/or its interpretation by actors – Jones 1994, 2001; Schneider and Ingram 1997; Popper and Lipshitz 1998).

Learning is also influenced by political dynamics. As part of the working rules in the policy subsystem, rules affecting information management and knowledge production are a result of the power equilibria within the subsystem (Weiss 1983, Jenkins-Smith 1988, Bennet and Howlett 1992, Schneider and Ingram 1997: chap. 6). Thus, learning may have a strategic character, in the sense it helps policy participants to promote their interests and values (Majone 1989). In this respect, the level of conflict within a subsystem may hinder (consensual and high polarized subsystems) or promote (subsystems with moderates level of conflict) learning (Capano 1996, Thomas 1999, Jenkins-Smith 1988, Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier 1993).

Policy learning should be also distinguished from policy change itself (Levy 1994: 289-290, Bennett and Howlett 1992: 290) – learning may take place without change occurring; indeed, it may contribute to reinforce the existing status quo. In this respect, the translation of usable knowledge product of learning into changes in policy designs is also mediated by institutional arrangements resulting from the balance of power within the subsystem. Subsystems where information rules have the main goal of contributing to maintain subsystem's closure and to prevent outsiders influence in policy-making, make more difficult usable knowledge produced outside the subsystem be finally utilized (Hansen and King 2001, Gormley 2007). In contrast, more open subsystems are expected to be more receptive to different sources of usable knowledge. Besides, the utilization of usable knowledge to produce policy change also depends on the conjunctural feasibility of the proposals (Kingdon 1995).

### *3. Mechanisms of policy change: conflict expansion*

As in the endogenous change mechanism, conflict expansion is triggered by subsystem participants unhappy with some aspect of its internal working or policy results. Being more costly than endogenous change, it is expected that participants recur to conflict expansion in a subsidiary way – in case endogenous policy change is not possible. Thus, it is plausible to expect that outsiders and newcomers will recur to this mechanism in a greater extent compared with insiders – who have a permanent access to the subsystem's decision-making processes (Real-Dato 2009, 131). When access or change are denied, the only alternative policy change promoters have is to expand internal conflict beyond the subsystem's boundaries, by involving other previously uninterested actors (Schaatschneider 1960). External participants may alter the existing power relationships within the subsystem or move the decision to a more favourable action arena. In this sense, this mechanism implies an expansion of the analytical policy space outside the subsystem's boundaries, activating relationships between it and previously isolated arenas (figure 3).

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Conflict expansion demands investing a greater amount of resources compared with endogenous change. Unless change promoters are affluent enough to individually bear the costs, conflict expansion usually depends on collective action processes, ranging from organization to mass mobilizations. So a first step in this mechanism is to explain how change promoters solve collective action problems (Olson 1965; Hardin 1982; Taylor 1987; Kollock 1998). Some variables taken into account by the huge literature on this topic are: participants' orientations, distribution of these orientations in the population of potential participants, the structure of the action situation (i.e. rules, payoffs), the presence of skilled leadership, and framing strategies used by those leaders.[16]

Baumgartner and Jones identify two interrelated strategies change promoters (or change entrepreneurs) use to expand conflict beyond the subsystem's boundaries: *policy image redefinition* and *venue shopping*. Image redefinition implies a strategic manipulation which aims to undermine the positive legitimating policy image and redirect attention of potential allies outside the subsystem to show them previously unperceived (or underestimated) links between the action arenas they are participants of and the subsystem. This may be done by affecting either potential allies' strategic calculations – redefinition shows unperceived opportunities of benefit – or by stimulating a 'logic of appropriateness' (March and Olsen 1984, 1989) through the activation of normative orientations. In this respect, the effectiveness of image redefinition in attracting allies' support and creating a shared perception of the action situation (Ostrom 2005, 108) greatly depends on the promoters' ability to combine in the narratives forming the new image elements pertaining to potential allies' discourse along with broader, socially accepted values and images (Hajer 1995).

Public opinion (considered in a double nature, as a part of general attributes of the community, but also as a particular action arena where its main participants are media and opinion leaders) plays a fundamental role in this process. The perception of political opportunities for potential allies is highly related to the social legitimacy of the claims and the public perception of the claimers. This is why public opinion is a main target of change promoters' strategies of image redefinition, as public and media attention gives potential allies (particularly those in macro-political action arenas – i.e. parliament) a cue of the importance of the stakes implied by the issue. Also, although subject to intentional manipulation, public opinion is not completely under control. In this sense, change promoters must be alert in case unexpected changes in public mood or a focusing event redirect public and media attention. The effect of such changes on the conflict expansion mechanism may both facilitating – they may open an opportunity to expand conflict to other action arenas – or hindering – by diverting attention to other issues.[17]

Concerning venue shopping, it is the attempt to move decision-making processes into the institutional agenda of external action arenas not controlled by the subsystem's

[16] See Kollock (1998) for an extensive review of the literature on this topic.
[17] This is the reasoning implied in the mechanisms of 'salience disruption' and 'dimension shift' identified by Jones and Jenkins-Smith (2009, 42) in their recent revision of the theoretical role of public opinion in the ACF, which is now contemplated as an element crucial in trans-subsystem relationships. Indeed, Jones and Jenkins-Smith acknowledge their debt with the PET framework in this revision (2009, 54, note 7).

dominant actors. Here is important the formal institutional structure of the policy and the concentration of policy relevant authority among different decision-making units (i.e. federal structures offer more opportunities to venue shopping than unitary centralised states – Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 239-240; Baumgartner, Foucault and François 2006). Besides, which venue policy proponents select may be guided either by strategic calculus or ideological criteria (Pralle 2003).

The analysis of this mechanism also requires taking into account the dynamics in the relationship between change promoters and allies. Such relationships are not exempt from the collective action problems above mentioned, and allies' degree of commitment and support may vary depending on a number of factors (i.e. whether the alliance is constructed over strategic calculation or allies are motivated by normative orientations, or the promoters' ability to force allies to follow a particular behaviour).

As the issue reaches the institutional agenda at an external venue, the possibility of policy change depends on the dynamics at those action arenas. In this sense, it is important the positions allies have in these arenas, the resources they control, the degree of leverage allies have in decision processes, the rules at work in the action arena (i.e., the type of majority required to pass an initiative) or if the final definition of the issue is compatible with the other participants values and preferences in the external action arena, etc. Thus, the efforts of change promoters in promoting their pet policy image should continue even when the issue has been 'uploaded' into an external action arena.

Finally, the results of conflict expansion also depend on the change promoters' ability to overcome *countermobilization* efforts by other participants opposed to policy change within the subsystem or outside it (Cobb and Ross 1997).

### *4. Mechanism of policy change: exogenous impacts*

Reference approaches present exogenous factors (material conditions, attributes of the community and other action arenas) as contextual elements in action situations which influence is mediated by interaction processes within relevant action arenas. In this sense, endogenous change and conflict expansion take into account the presence of such exogenous factors (i.e. changes in public mood – attribute of the community – may open opportunity windows for change promoters to expand conflict beyond the subsystem). In contrast, the exogenous impacts mechanism implies that *exogenous impacts are responsible directly* for triggering policy change – that is, policy change occurs independently of internal processes within the subsystem (see figure 4). As in the case of conflict expansion, this mechanism implies an extension of the policy space outside the subsystem's boundaries.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Policy change through exogenous impacts depends, on the one hand, on the existence of hierarchical relationships between the subsystem and other external action arenas. In these cases, decisions made at those external action arenas may directly shape policy designs, bypassing the subsystem's decision-making processes. External actors in those hierarchically superior arenas get attracted by the issues dealt within the subsystem as a consequence of focusing events or changes in the level of public

attention on the subsystem. Thus, in contrast with the mechanisms of endogenous change and conflict expansion, change promoters are external to the subsystem. As in the other cases, their intervention may be motivated by the expectation of some benefit or by normative orientations.[18]

The exogenous impact mechanism also works when decisions (and thus, their results) produced outside the subsystem indirectly affect policy designs. This may occur when those decisions alter one or more elements of the subsystem's action situation (rules, participants, positions, etc.). In this sense, exogenous impacts disrupt the subsystem's internal equilibrium changing its elements. That is why the effect of exogenous impacts is indirect, since change is then boosted from within the subsystem. Those external impacts transmit into the subsystem hierarchically (i.e. the effect of cabinet reshuffles on goals and government personnel occupying decision-making positions) or through the horizontal links the subsystem maintain with other action arenas they are functionally interdependent (i.e. changes in energy policy may affect the components of the action situation in the transport policy subsystem). Of course, if exogenous impacts threaten policy participants' interests or values (particularly those of the actors forming the decisional core) they may try to limit the scope of changes – i.e. persuading external decision-makers or, in case this fails, recurring to conflict expansion.

## V. Assessing the epistemological and theoretical implications of the MPSC

When explaining policy dynamics, scholars make in the theoretical frameworks they use a number of strong epistemological and theoretical choices which they are often not conscious of (Capano 2009, 8). Being unaware of this fact may be problematic, as it may hide shortcomings and incoherences which undermine explanatory accounts built on the chosen framework. Thus, it makes sense to examine the epistemological (the point of view which reality is viewed from) and theoretical (the development of those epistemological premises when confronting the research target) choices implied by the MPSC framework just presented in order to assess its internal coherence.

### *A. Epistemological choices*

According to Capano (2009, 11) there are three basic epistemological problems that any theoretical framework of policy dynamics must solve: 1) the way events progress, that is, the development of change (whether change is linear or non-linear); 2) the dynamics of development (evolutionary or revolutionary change); and 3) the motors of change.

Concerning the first of these choices, it is important to clarify what linear/non-linear means. If the terms refer exclusively to the way the object of change changes (in

[18] Here there is an intersection between this mechanism and those of endogenous change and conflict expansion. In their search for available policy alternatives, external actors may activate conflict expansion when they take such alternatives from the 'pool' of ideas within the subsystem, opening an opportunity window for outsiders to promote their pet solutions. In addition, external entrepreneurs become potential vehicles for policy learning when they search solutions in other structurally equivalent subsystems.

this case, policy designs) it is difficult to admit that linearity (that is, changes conceived as following a programmed sequence) is present in the MPSC framework.[19] Policy designs do not *necessarily* prefigure future policy designs. This will be developed later when referring to theoretical choices.

Alternatively, the way events progress may refer to the sequence of events eventually leading to policy change. Here it is possible to talk about some kind of *linearity*. The MPSC framework identifies a number of ideal type mechanisms (defined as generative causal processes – se below) consisting in a number of related events. For instance, in the conflict expansion mechanism: awareness of the problem by subsystem participants (change promoters) > failure of endogenous change (in case promoters have access to the subsystem decisional core) > organization/mobilization > conflict expansion (venue shopping/image redefinition) > displacement of decision to external action arenas (obtaining support from allies) > decision in external action arenas > changes in policy design). However, this does not mean that the framework proposes a *purely linear* view of reality and policy dynamics, in the sense of mechanisms being as pre-designed programmes consisting of a necessary number of steps leading to a necessary end. In this respect, the sequence may stop at any point, and mechanisms my interact forming complex generative causal process or paths of change (i.e. failed conflict expansion may generate usable knowledge that can be used by dominant actors within the subsystem to produce endogenous change). Thus, as in the case of the PET, the MPSC assumes a *disconnected linearity* in sequences of events governing policy dynamics (Capano 2009, 22).

With respect to the second epistemological choice, *the dynamics of development* – whether change is revolutionary or evolutionary – the MPSC do not prefigure any of them. Changes in policy designs may be "innovative departures from previous directions" (Capano 2009, 12)[20] or an incremental variation from previous designs.

Finally, regarding *the motors of change*, these are defined as "the generating forces leading to change" (Capano 2009, 13), identified with a number of ideal-types processes: competition, learning and imitation, conflict, cooperation, institutional regulation, systemic self-organization, chance (contingency) or agency (13). This is a tricky issue, since in contrast with the former epistemological decisions, Capano does not clarify whether this is an exhaustive list and, more important, whether these ideal types are mutually exclusive elements. In any case, it is evident these 'motors of change' coincide with the processes found in the mechanisms identified by the MPSC – confirming the tendency postulated by Capano of existing theories to change consisting in a blend of these different generating forces. Firstly, it is obvious that agency is present in all mechanisms, as well as a certain level of institutional regulation, both elements key in the IAD framework which serves as a baseline for the MPSC. Concerning particular mechanisms, endogenous change, for instance, may also involve learning processes, cooperation among actors (in order to create a learning favourable institutional environment), institutional regulation (in case endogenous change consist in merely apply previously devised recipes included in the causal theory the policy design is based on) even conflict (as a source that can be useful to generate information

[19] In this respect, linearity is an inner feature of 'life cycle' theories (Van de Ven and Poole 1995, 515), which assume that change occurs along a prescribed (or programmed) sequence of stages, whereby a series of prefigured potentialities develop.
[20] Here we can include policy termination.

later transformed in policy usable knowledge). Besides, chance is also present in all mechanisms, but maybe it is more important in the exogenous impact one.

### *B. Theoretical choices*

There are five theoretical choices Capano (2009, 13) considers should be taken into account: 1) what is the object of policy change (the definition of change); 2) the scope of change (incremental or radical); 3) the output of change (reversible or irreversible); 4) the level of abstraction and how to solve the structure/agency dilemma; 5) type of causality and explanatory variables

Concerning *the object of policy change*, it has been already mentioned that it has been identified with changes in policy designs, defined as "observable phenomena found in statutes, administrative guidelines, court decrees, programs, and even the practices and procedures of street level case workers as they interact with policy recipients" (Schneider and Ingram 1997, 2). Policy designs (decided at the subsystem's collective decision level) are *the content of policy*, including a number of different features already indicated: goals and problems to solve, target populations, instruments, rules, agents and implementation structures (which configure the 'operational' level of policy subsystems), along with rationales and assumptions implied by the policy design. Such observational features provide a reference point against which to evaluate any change: variations in any these observable phenomena would indicate the presence of policy change.

Here there is the question whether to consider or not the finally implemented policy (comprising outputs and outcomes) at the operative level as the 'real' object of change. On the one hand, policy outputs – the type and level of policy product resulting directly from policy implementation – are usually determined within policy designs (in specified goals and/or implementation rules), so these policy outputs may be considered included within the concept of policy design. Yet the main problem here is with policy outcomes (the actual impact of policy designs on target populations and other actors). Firstly, using outcomes as a reference for policy change has the difficulty frequently underlined in the policy evaluation literature of assessing the causal impact of changes in policy designs (that is, whether outcomes are strictly a result of public policy). Besides, in the MPSC framework, changes in perceived policy outcomes are not the consequence of policy change, but usually the 'signal' that makes policy participants aware of the need to change policy designs (which does not mean that previous levels of outcomes are necessarily restored). So policy designs provide a more stable reference point from which to measure and evaluate policy change.

The second theoretical question refers to the *scope of change*, the MPSC consider this a strictly empirical, open question. Firstly, none of the mechanisms of change the framework identifies is associated *a priori* with any specific type of change (incremental or paradigmatic). This is consistent with the above mentioned epistemological choice on the dynamics of development. Furthermore, it is also difficult to establish *a priori* definitions of what is substantive or minor (incremental) policy change. On the one hand, this may depend on the length of the time period considered

in the analysis: changes considered revolutionary at a time, on a longer time span may be considered just minor changes.[21]

On the other hand, the focus on policy designs proposed in the framework does calls for avoiding traditional clear cut distinctions, such as that between substantive change associated to changes in goals or assumptions and incremental change linked to policy instruments (i.e. Hall 1993; Howlett and Cashore 2009). Policy designs reveal as configurations of elements where, for instance, instrument or implementation structures may be intertwined to basic assumptions or policy goals. Hence, identifying the scope of change must result from closely looking at such relationships between the different components of policy designs.[22]

Regarding the question on *the output of change* (its reversible or irreversible character), since the progress of change for policy designs is not considered linear, it is coherent to assert that changes in policy designs as such may be reversible. In this respect, the reversibility or irreversibility of a policy design must be empirically assessed.[23] As a hypothesis, and related to the above postulated mechanism of policy stability, reversibility/irreversibility of a policy design would depend on the cost returning to previous design have for policy participants. If the process of promoting a turning back is more costly than maintaining the current policy design (including here mobilization costs, in case promoters of change find resistance from other policy participants), it is likely that a policy design would be irreversible.

On the *structure/agency dilemma* and the *level of abstraction* theoretical choices, the MPSC framework, as it does the IAD framework, acknowledges that it is impossible to explain social phenomena (in this case, policy dynamics) without considering the necessary interplay between structure and agency. The structural element is represented here by the role played by institutions as constraints shaping (but not determining) agents' choices and behaviour in their interaction with other agents. Thus, both elements are necessary elements in the explanation. Besides, the MPSC takes into account not only events occurring at the individual-agent level, but also how other macro-phenomena (changes in biophysical conditions or attributes of the community – i.e. changes in public mood – or the results produced at other related action arenas – i.e.

[21] For example, in order to assess the relevance of the change the Spanish research training policy had undergone in the early 2000s, the author had to examine the evolution of this policy since its inception, in the early 1900s.

[22] The above mentioned study on Spanish research training policy confirms this point. The element in policy design which is finally identified with substantive policy change is neither goals nor ends (which are, with slight changes, the same since 1900 – providing human resources to the research and academic system) but the instrument through which the policy is implemented (grants, research fellowships and labour contracts). Usually, changes in instruments have been associated with minor policy changes, but in this case, instruments are intimately associated with the ideological assumptions research training policy is based on. Research training has been traditionally assumed as a function economically supported by the state, but its direct implementation has depended on members of the academic-scientific community. The ideology of this community has assumed that until the research trainee obtain her Ph.D. degree she cannot be considered as a professional member of the community. Thus, the types of instrument that better fits with these ideological assumptions are research fellowships and grants, where the research trainee is formally considered a student. In contrast, labour contracts assume a professional relationship between the parts, which is not compatible with the assumed master-apprentice relationship. Besides, changes in the instrument were also substantive from a budgetary point of view, since the substitution of research grants by labour contracts implied almost doubling the budget assigned to this policy.

[23] In fact, when analysing the evolution of policy design in research training policy, it is frequent to find such 'turning back' movements and policy reversals to previous designs.

changes in government) may affect interactions among agents within a particular (subsystem) action arena.

Finally, concerning the questions of the *type of causality* and the explanatory variables in use, the framework focus on the *mechanisms of policy stability and change* is a result of acknowledging the difficulty of elaborating general covering explanations of policy change (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). The complexity of policy dynamics – some of their characteristics are: a great number of intervening factors difficult to manage statistically, ambiguity and non-linear causal links, importance of sequence of events, and decisive role played by agents decisions (George and Bennet 2005, 211-212; Howlett and Rayner 2006) – requires a "processualist" approach (Pettigrew 1997) which takes into account the embeddedness of processes along multiple analytical layers (here action arenas), the temporal interconnectedness of events, the interrelation between context and action, and the need for holistic explanations.[24] In these conditions, using causal mechanisms is a more suitable explanatory strategy than more traditional correlational-statistical explanation. In this sense, far from being a mere narrative or thick description of the process that leads to a particular event, the mechanisms identified in the proposed framework allow the student to combine a certain degree of theoretical generality with the widely contextual character of policy dynamics.

Here causal mechanisms are used as a synonym of 'generative causal processes' (Goldthorpe 2001), that is, as the chain of logically related events (usually at a lower level of analysis) linking an initial state (policy design at moment *t*) to a final state (policy design at moment *t+n*). This is similar to the concept of explanation as accounting for why and how an event happens, which ultimately – quoting Elster (1989, 3) – "takes the form of *citing an earlier event as the cause of the event we want to explain, together with some account of the causal mechanism connecting events*." (italics added). This concept of mechanism also adjust to the core meaning of the concept, according to Gerring (2008, 178), as "the pathway or process by which an effect is produced or purpose is accomplished." However, it must be admitted that the definition of the concept used here (generative causal process) does not coincide with other meanings found in the literature, mainly those emphasising the 'black-box' character of the concept (for a review, see Mahoney 2001, Mayntz 2004, and Gerring 2008).[25]

A final theoretical question pointed out by Capano is that of the *explanatory variables* used. In this respect, the MPSC framework just imports those used by the IAD framework (see table 1 and figure 1). Here, one additional remark must be made with respect the role of interests and ideas – that is, the logic of expected consequences vs. the logic of the appropriateness – as causal drivers. The framework does not make any assumption about the primacy of any of these logics, leaving to empirical analysis to ascertain which motivation guides agents' behaviour in action situations, and their possible combinations. This is related to the question of the endogenous/exogenous

[24] Barzelay's adopts the same postulates in his institutional processualist framework (Barzelay 2003; Barzelay and Gallego 2006).

[25] An example of this 'black-box' definition is the one by George and Bennet (2005, 137). These authors define causal mechanisms "as ultimately unobservable physical, social, or psychological processes through which agents with causal capacities operate, but only in specific contexts or conditions, to transfer energy, information, or matter to other entities." In this respect, Gerring (2008) offers a most interesting discussion of the epistemological assumptions behind the different conceptions of causal mechanism in the literature.

character of variables. The system-like configuration of the IAD framework extrapolated to the MPSC (figure 1 and following) shows the existence of relationships between all its components. There is no a clear-cut separation between 'independent' and 'dependent' variables, but a complex configuration of mutual influences and feedback loops. Thus, policy designs and its results influence the subsystem's components (both at the operational and decision-making levels, and sometimes mediated by cognitive processes as some effects are subject to the participants' interpretation), as well as other action arenas (see the mechanism of exogenous impacts) and even the attributes of the community (public mood) and biophysical conditions within which the subsystem operates. Besides, as the conflict expansion mechanism shows, influences on other action arenas and on the attributes of the community are subject to strategic manipulation by participants. However, it must be added that neither these 'circuits' are closed at all – since pure exogenous variables (influences from other subsystems or from changes in biophysical and socioeconomic conditions outside the subsystem) also influence subsystem dynamics.

## VI. Conclusion

This paper has described the main elements of the synthetic explanatory framework for policy dynamics set out by the author (Real-Dato 2009) and discussed some other aspects left aside in the previous version. It has shown how the framework starts from acknowledging the problems with main lenses for the explanation of policy change (MS, ACF, PET) and the possibility of constructing a synthesis that allow such problems to be solved and theoretical understanding of policy dynamics advance. In this task, the IAD framework constitutes a basic conceptual tool, serving as baseline to the development of five ideal-type mechanisms that, in practice, may be combined to account for the complexity of dynamics associated to processes of policy change and stability. After describing the main features of these mechanisms, the paper has discussed the implications of the underlying epistemological and theoretical choices implicit in the framework. These are, basically, on the epistemological dimension: non-linearity in the view of change, a not-prefigured dynamic of change (revolutionary or evolutionary), and multiple alternatives as motors of change (learning, conflict, cooperation, chance). Concerning the theoretical choices, they are: policy designs as the object of change; scope of change and its reversibility as an open question (in consonance with the not-prefigured dynamic of change); combination of structure and agency elements in the explanation; adoption of a processualist approach to explanation, focused in uncovering the generative causal processes (mechanisms) driving policy dynamics (change and stability), and consideration of the mutual relationships among elements (endogeneity).

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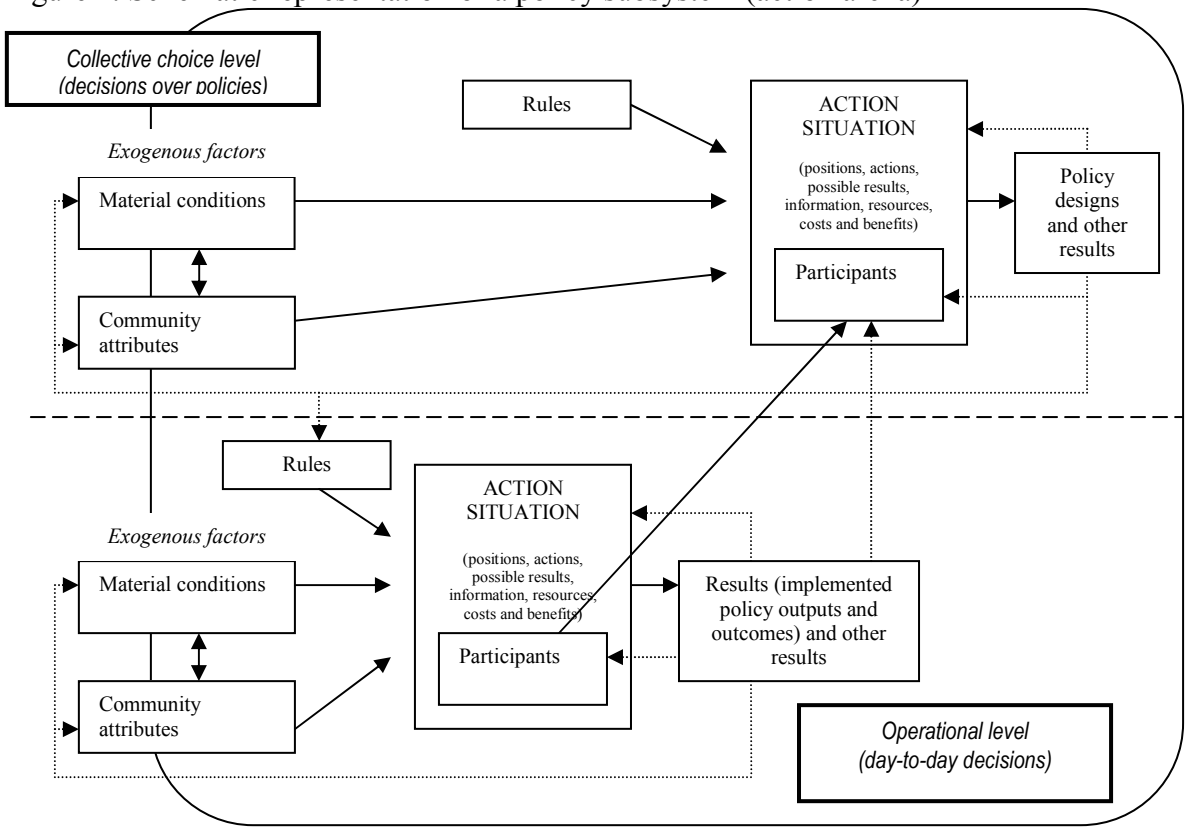
## TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Elements of the IAD framework

| | |
|---|---|
| **Action arena** | Social space where individuals interact (Ostrom 1999, 42-43). Every action arena consists of: a) participants, and b) an action situation |
| **Participants** | Bounded-rational actors; preferences influenced by shared culture and experiences; motivations ranging from material interests to normative orientations |
| **Action situation** | "Whenever two or more individuals are faced with a set of potential actions that jointly produce outcomes" (Ostrom 2005, 32). Actions situations consist in: 1) participants; 2) positions they occupy; 3) set of actions available to participants; 4) results linked to actions; 5) *information* about the situation; 6) *costs and benefits* linked to actions and results; and 7) degree of participant's *control*; |
| **Rules** | "Shared understandings by participants about enforced prescriptions concerning what actions (or outcomes) are required, prohibited, or permitted" (Ostrom 2005, 18); rules structure action situations by affecting their different elements. They are classified in (in the order corresponding to the elements of the action situations they regulate): 1) boundary rules, 2) position rules, 3) choice rules, 4) scope rules, 5) information rules, 6) payoff rules, and 7) aggregation rules (Ostrom 2005, 190). |
| **Exogenous factors** | These are: 1) *Material or biophysical conditions* affecting the action situation; 2) *Community attributes* (generally accepted social norms, common understandings about the structure of action arenas, and the social distribution of preferences and resources). |
| **Levels of analysis** | Rules organize in three hierarchical ordered levels of analysis: 1) *operational level* (rules affecting participants' day-to-day decisions); 2) *collective choice level* (rules regulating decision making affecting the operational level); 3) *constitutional level* (rules regulating the making of collective choice rules) |

Figure 1. Schematic representation of a policy subsystem (action arena)




Source: Real-Dato (2009, 128), with minor revisions. Adapted from Kiser and Ostrom (1982, 207) and Ostrom (2005, 15).

Figure 2. Endogenous policy change (learning)

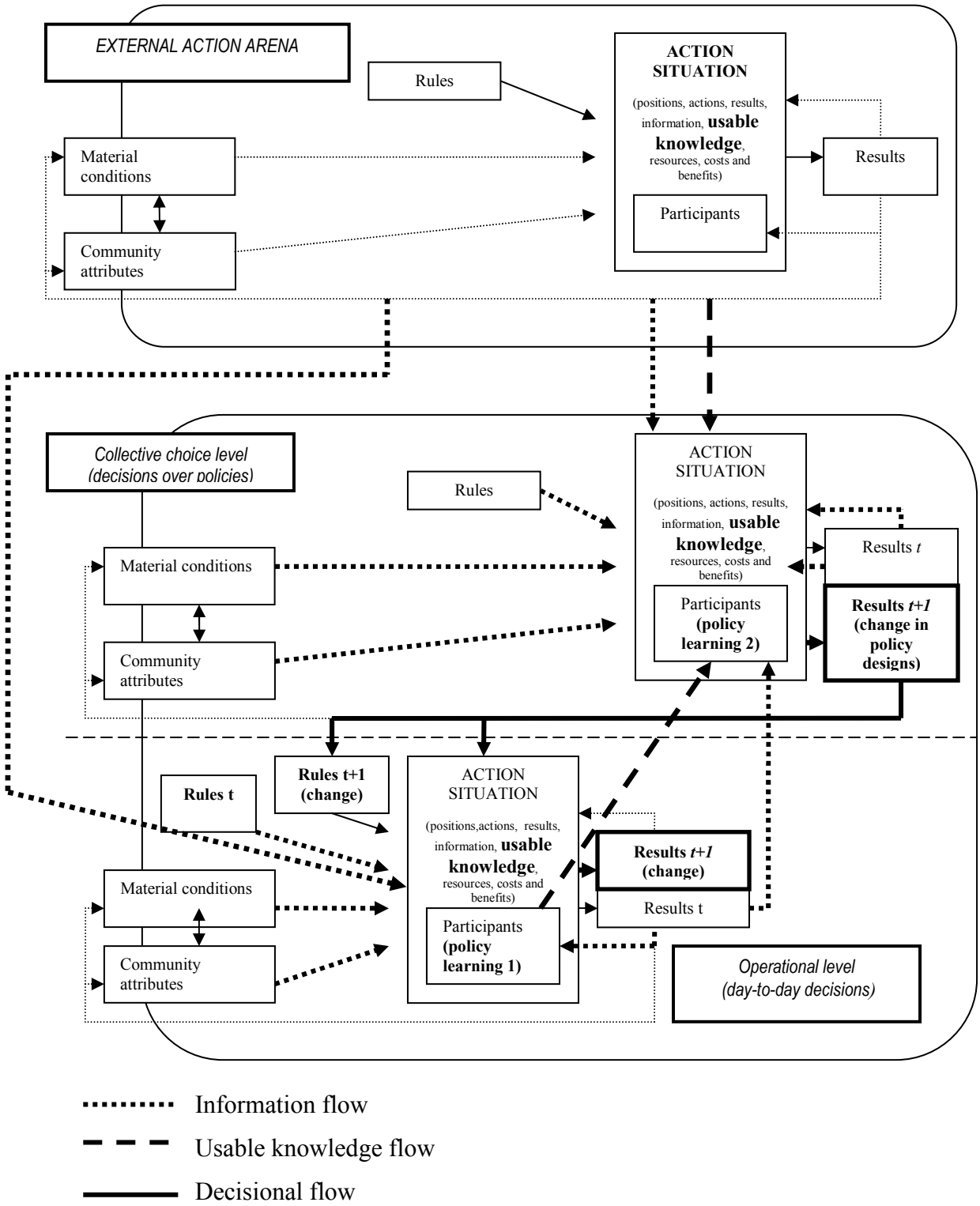
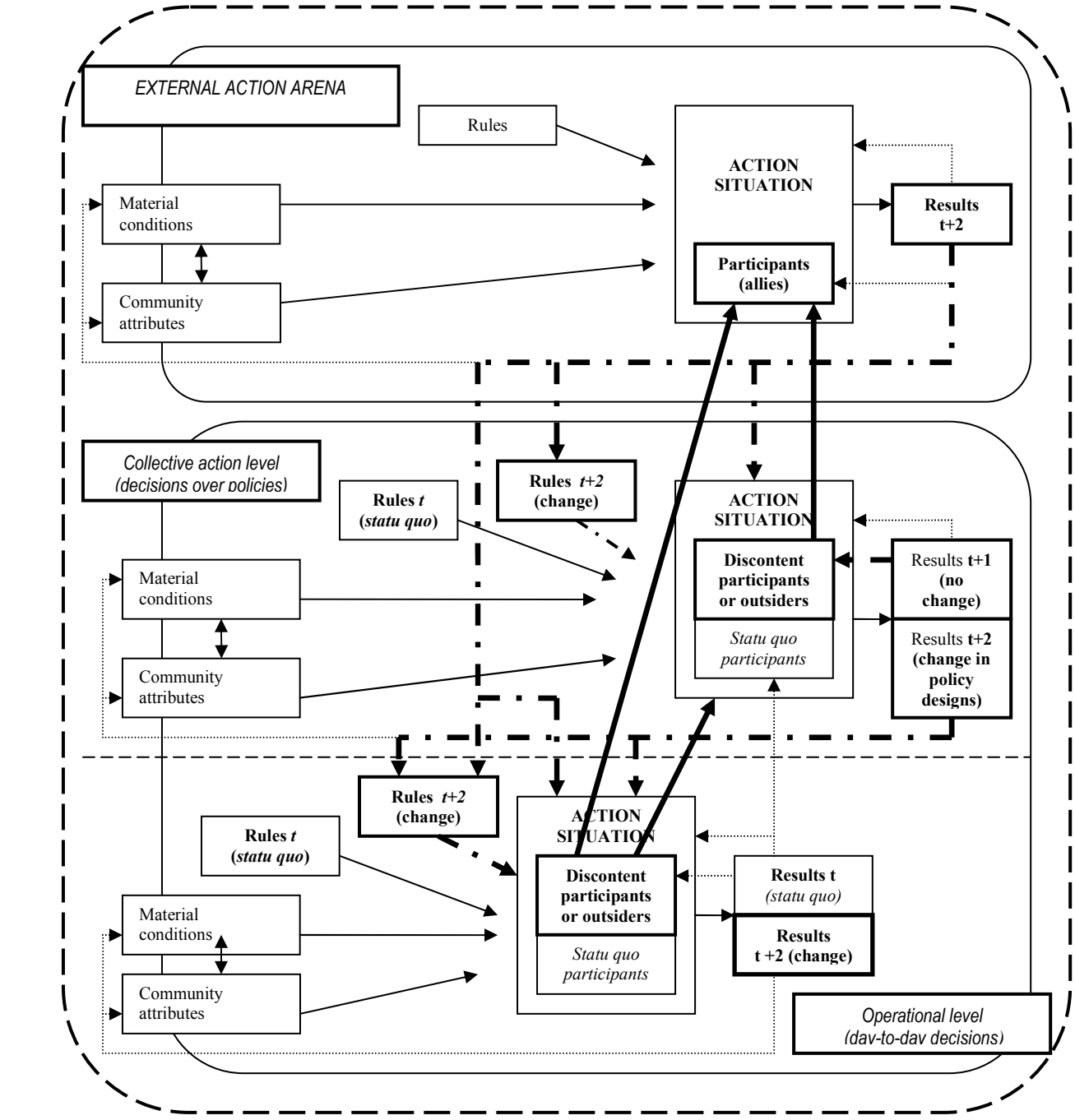


Figure 3. Mechanism of conflict expansion




Conflict expansion

Decisional flow

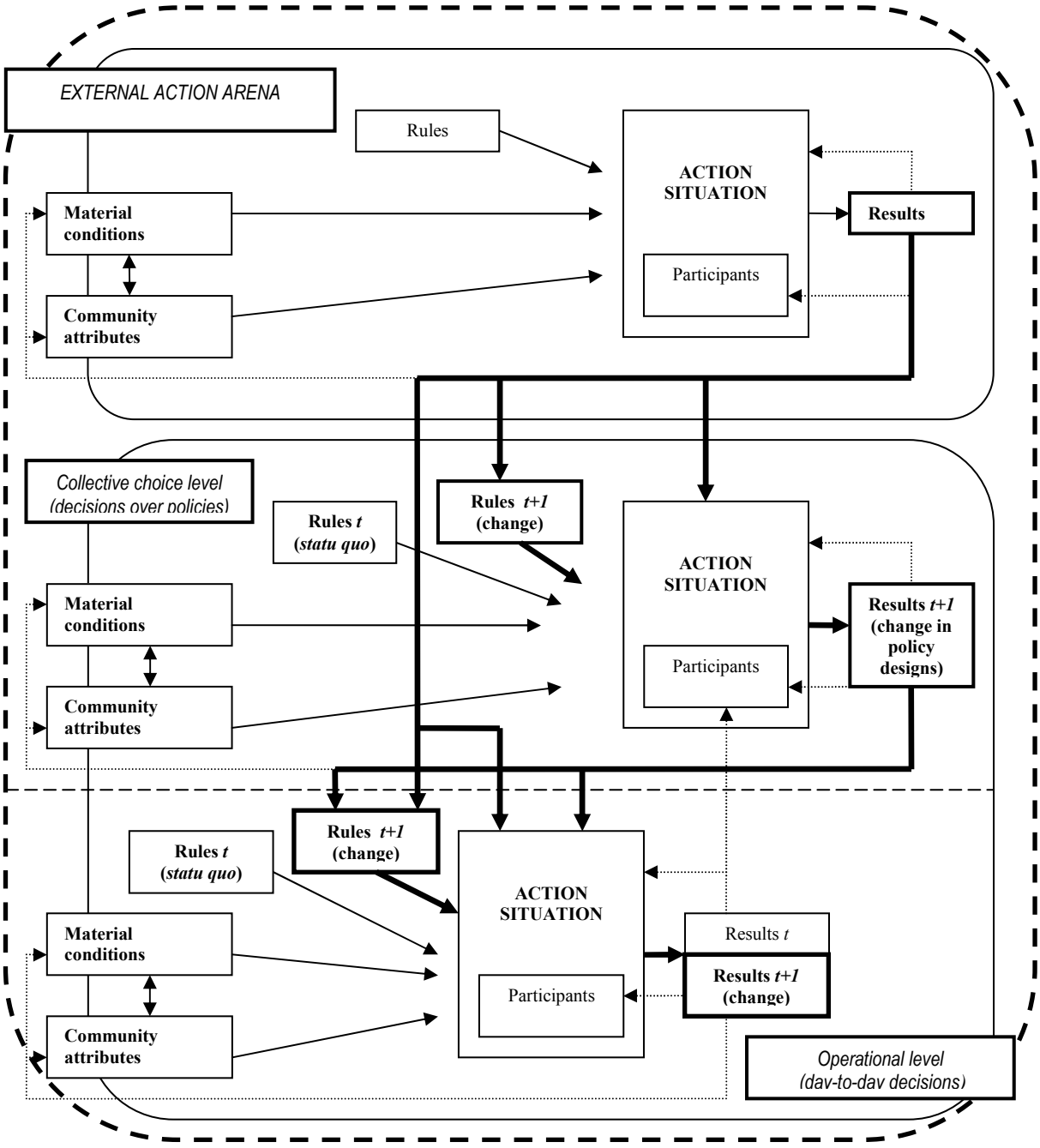



Figure 4. Exogenous impacts mechanism