

Super-Optimization

A New Approach to National Environmental Policymaking

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Many policy analysts strongly believe that the gains in environmental protection achieved during the past decade or two have come at the expense of economic growth and improved social welfare. Political conservatives often do not accept the argument that the achievement of environmental protection (or sustainable development) might bring with it new opportunities for economic development in addition to improvements in social welfare. It is now time to subject national environmental policymaking to much closer scrutiny, and even to change the way we handle policymaking, to ensure that all future efforts to enhance environmental quality guarantee economic improvement and enhance social welfare. One way to move in this direction is to adopt an approach to policymaking called super-optimization.

Super-optimization is a new approach, one that happens to fit quite well with the “polder model” so prominent in The

Netherlands. When we think of optimality in decision making, we think in terms of maximizing an objective at the least possible cost. Therefore, for example, if we were committed to reducing water pollution, we would want to do it in the most efficient way (i.e., not spend a guilder more than we had to for each unit of improvement achieved). A super-optimal decision, however, is not so much concerned with achieving a goal at the least possible cost as it is with achieving that goal while simultaneously achieving the greatest level of benefits possible in other domains. Thus, a super-optimal policy with regard to reducing water pollution would not only reduce water pollution to the greatest extent possible but also do so in a way that spun off as much long-term investment in new technology as possible, created as many new jobs as possible for those who really needed them, and reduced pollution levels in other media at the same time.

PREREQUISITES FOR SUPER-OPTIMAL POLICYMAKING

Representation of All Relevant Stakeholder Interests. To achieve super-optimality in environmental decision making, it is essential to involve representatives of all stakeholding interests in the process of decision making. Elected representatives can sometimes handle this responsibility. In some situations, however, ad hoc representatives—selected just for the purpose of deciding how to handle a particular decision—will need to be involved. A systematic appraisal of the interests of all stakeholders must be completed prior to bringing the groups together. This will ensure an appropriate agenda for problem solving. The ground rules for representation and decision making must be clear from the outset, and whatever is decided must still be acted on by those with the formal authority to do so.

Creation of New Forums for Joint Problem Solving. National policy questions are typically handled in rather narrow policy arenas. Thus, environmental policy is usually drafted by environmental agency personnel, reviewed by environmental specialists in the parliament, and debated by environmental activists with the strongest possible interest in the subject. Only when final decisions have been made are others drawn into the political debate. By that time, of course, it is too late to craft super-optimal policy proposals. To achieve super-optimality, new forums must be designed that bring together potential beneficiaries of new policies—even if they do not view themselves as stakeholders. These forums must emphasize the search for “added value.” For this to happen, they need to (a) operate informally, (b) bring knowledgeable decision makers together before they have made their decision, and (c) involve a range of recognized experts who can help bring the parties to the most informed conclusion possible. Such forums need to operate out of the glare of the public spotlight. Because all key stakeholders

are directly involved, however, this is not an antidemocratic proposal.

Effective Facilitation by a Neutral Party. Most joint problem-solving efforts involving large numbers of people need to be facilitated by a neutral party with process management skills and a fair amount of substantive knowledge about the policy in question. In the search for super-optimal policies, a neutral party needs to manage the recruitment of stakeholder representatives, assist in the creation and operation of a new forum, and explain the joint problem-solving process to the outside world. The parties may even decide to ask the neutral party to help monitor implementation or serve a mediating role if disagreements emerge at any point. There are professional facilitators skilled in this kind of work.

A Redefinition of Agency and Organizational Leadership. One of the key obstacles to formulating super-optimal policy is the resistance of agency heads, corporate CEOs, and nongovernmental organization directors. When each believes that he or she must be in charge of the process or dictate the terms of acceptable policy, the search for ways of maximizing benefits across multiple policy arenas is difficult, if not impossible. Only when agency and organizational leaders master the process of lateral leadership can the search for super-optimality succeed. This requires those in positions of authority to commit to a joint problem-solving rather than a top-down approach to policymaking. Unfortunately, many senior officials inside and outside government have not yet mastered the skill of “leading from the side,” usually by example, rather than leading by issuing forceful mandates from the top down.

An Emphasis on Strategic Partnerships. The implementation of super-optimal policies often requires “partnering” among unfamiliar coalition participants. By its very definition, super-optimal policy cuts across

policy arenas in new ways. Thus, strategic partnerships, involving cooperation among groups that have not worked together before (even among former “enemies”), may be necessary. The design and management of such partnerships requires a great deal of attention. There almost always needs to be a “managing” partner, but even in such cases, the ground rules governing the obligations of all the other partners must be clearly understood by everyone. Such new relationships may take time to evolve. Instruction in the tools and techniques of partnering may well have to be included as part of any agreement.

A NATIONAL EXPERIMENT

A super-optimal approach to the next round of national environmental policymaking in The Netherlands might well be the subject of a national experiment. Can you imagine an approach to environmental policymaking that brings together representatives of several ministries to search for improvements in environmental policy that simultaneously seek to maximize eco-

nomie benefits and improvements in social welfare?

Such an experiment would require cabinet-level coordination. It would not have to take a very long time to design and implement. Also, it should be organized specifically to determine whether super-optimality is a feasible goal of national policymaking. Therefore, a learning or evaluation component should be included.

The key elements of such a national experiment would include

1. An important environmental policy question that needs to be addressed at the national level
2. Commitments from multiple ministries (and other levels of government) and non-governmental leaders to participate
3. A skilled facilitator (or facilitation group)
4. A careful process design (with clear benchmarks for evaluating the results)

A super-optimal approach to environmental policymaking or sustainable development can be achieved only if the leadership across multiple policy areas is prepared to try something new.