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ENTRY POINTS FOR DESIGN FOR POLICY: EXPLORING A FRAMEWORK WITH THE THEORY OF CHANGE

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ABSTRACT | Design for policy is an emerging field that, in some contexts, still fights for being acknowledged (Kimbell et al., 2023; Mortati, 2019). In this scenario, we propose a framework of three “entry points” for design for policy: (i) transferring design knowledge to non-designers, (ii) fostering co-creation among policy actors, and (iii) recognizing non-designer-led policy processes. In parallel, the Theory of Change (TOC) (Anderson, 2005) has gained attention as a tool in design for policy (Cole, 2022; Compton et al., 2019; La 27e Région, 2024). We propose a 90-minute activity to align the TOC with the authors' framework to explore how TOC can help pursue the conditions suggested by the three entry points to design for policy. Participants will be divided into groups, role-playing the following actors: (i) designers, (ii) policymakers, and (iii) policy takers and other stakeholders. The three groups will be guided to use the TOC collaboratively within a given policy scenario. They will engage in co-constructing a TOC, facilitated by a 3D version of the instrument, built following the LEGO® Serious Play® method.

KEYWORDS | DESIGN FOR POLICY, THEORY OF CHANGE, DESIGN KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER, RESEARCH THROUGH CO-DESIGN, NON-EXPERT DESIGN

1.X-format proposal

Design for policy is an emerging field for Design research and practice identifying the space where design approaches and methods innovate policy-making towards a more open, democratic and experimental process (Bason, 2014; Kimbell et al., 2023; La 27e Région, 2015). Although practices pertaining to this field have expanded in many – especially Western – countries, in some contexts they still remain niche, if not ‘invisible’, hardly or never acknowledged. This is the case, for instance, of the Italian scenario, where, apart from a few academic entities (Deserti et al., 2020; Giraldo Norha et al., 2020; Mortati et al., 2016; Mortati et al., 2019), this field seems to be uncharted. We have then proposed three possible ‘entry points’ to approach this area, as viable ways to start ‘doing’ design for policy where this is neither acknowledged nor consolidated: (i) to the transfer of design knowledge and expertise to non-designers within policy processes, (ii) the co-creation of knowledge among policy actors, and (iii) the recognition of non-designer-led policy processes. In our vision, these entry points represent conditions to be created in order to make design for policy possible and accessible. Therefore, we expect such conditions should be envisioned through a transformative design process. Hence the idea of connecting this perspective to the Theory of Change (TOC), a tool to design change that has recently gained a growing interest from researchers and practitioners in the field of public innovation and policy (Cole, 2022; Compton et al., 2019), even being questioned to sustain complex challenges (La 27e Région, 2024).

The hypothesis we would like to verify through this X-format is that TOC can be a meta-design tool to help designers – as well as non-expert designers – conceive the enabling conditions highlighted by the three “entry points”, define the transformative trajectories – traced through impact, outcomes, outputs, activities and inputs – that might generate the expected change for making design for policy possible. In this sense, each entry point should correspond to a different TOC that we need to build together with the research community engaged or intrigued by the topic.

On a practical and methodological level, we propose a workshop session of 90 minutes where participants are divided into three groups, according to the three “entry points” as changes to achieve. Within each group, participants are involved in a role-playing activity to relate with a different core actor in policy-making: (i) designers, (ii) policy makers, and (iii) policy takers. They are guided by facilitators and supported by written instructions to help interpret their roles, with the aim of collaboratively developing a Theory of Change (TOC) using the LEGO® Serious Play® method (n.d.). This approach enables them to “build” their vision of change in relation to a fictitious policy scenario that provides context for the assigned “entry point”. Participants are exposed to questions around the different points of view and interests of each category of stakeholders, the conditions enabling design for policy processes, and their precariousness. The three resulting TOCs are collectively discussed, reflecting on their similarities and differences, as well as on the challenges, dark points, needs and hopes they disclose.

The ultimate goals and takeaways of this session are to (i) unveil interrogations, barriers and triggers around the possibility to start practising design for policy, (ii) enable participants to picture themselves as potential “policy designers” (Whicher, & Swiatek, 2022; Vaz & Bosch Gomez, 2022), and (iii) endow them – and us authors – with actionable paths to achieve this possibility.

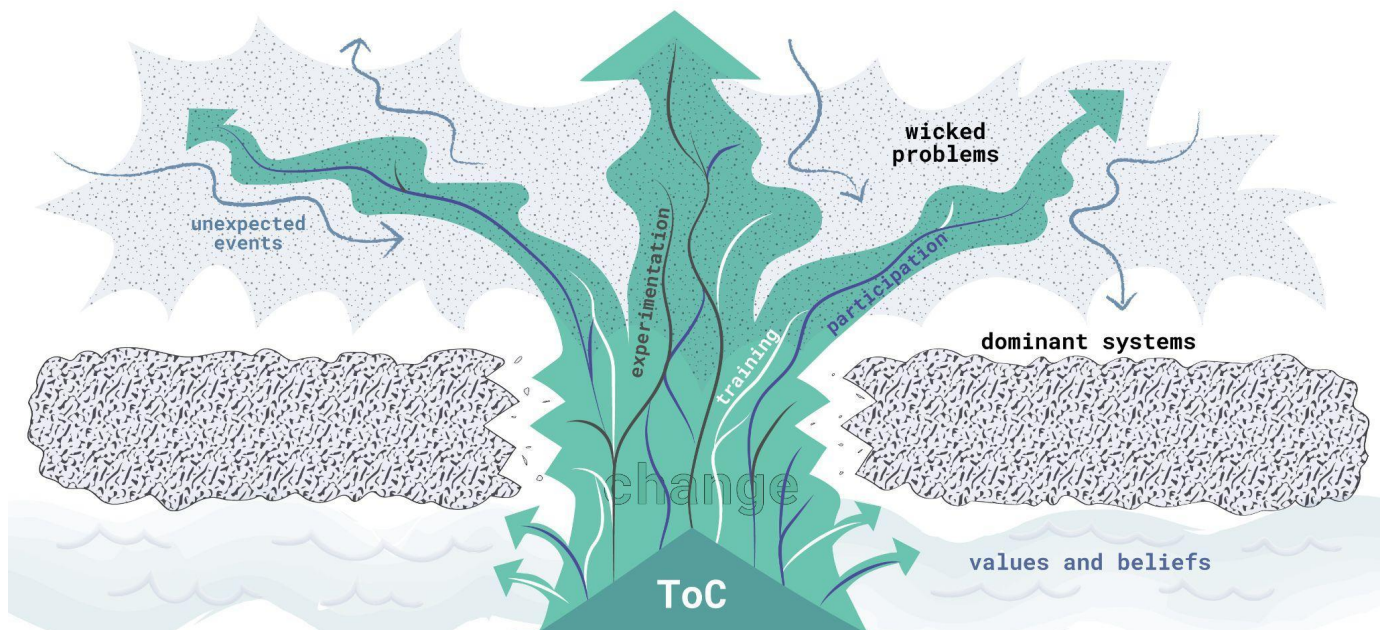


Figure 1. Strengthening TOC to challenge status quo and pursue complex public innovations; Illustration by one of the authors of the X-format proposal, created for a programme called "Pushing the Boundaries of Public Sector Innovation" (2023).

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