



Image: New Africa - https://stock.adobe.com/be_en/images/cobweb-on-wild-meadow-closeup-view/225593129?prev_url=detail
Icon in page corners: Spider Web icon by Hawraa Alsalman, from the Noun Project (<https://thenounproject.com/search/?q=spider%20web&i=1106831>)

Design for Policy

Authors: Jennifer-Ellen Rudkin, Alessandro Rancati

Key takeaways:

- Design should be considered in its broader meaning, not just as a creative discipline or a tool. It needs to be understood as a culture with specific values and practices. Such culture can help facilitate culture change in your organisation.
- One-time 'policy lab' sessions are best avoided in favour of a set of coordinated actions that allows for exploration, sensemaking and prototyping.
- Design culture is about exploring a policy context in a collaborative way. Particularly useful is using visual approaches to support the sensemaking process, e.g., mapping complex contexts and concepts with colleagues and stakeholders.
- Carefully scripted choreographies create a space for open yet structured sensemaking conversations among people with different understanding of the matter at hand.



There has been, in the past years, a growing recognition of the value of design-based approaches in policymaking (Bailey and Lloyd, 2016). This success can be weighed by looking at the number of design-driven innovation labs that have invested governments around the world.

Design-based approaches are systemic in nature, explore complex context using visual methods, bring several disciplines together to make sense of the problem space and formulate proposals that focus on the quality of the experience from the point of view of the final beneficiaries.

In the context of policymaking, such approaches often result in multistakeholder, collaborative practices being used to understand and creatively address public and social issues, as well as organizational ones, with special interest and focus on the final beneficiaries, i.e., citizens and civil society.

The European Commission has also adopted design by setting up the EU Policy Lab, a creative and collaborative space for innovative policymaking. In this context, a unique fit-to-purpose design activity is being developed in order to respond to the EC policymaking needs.

The word ‘design’ has accumulated several different uses and its meanings shift according to the context in which it is used.

‘It can refer to a process (the act or practice of designing); or to the result of that process (a design, sketch, plan or model); or to the products manufactured with the aid of a design (design goods); or to the look or overall pattern of a product (“I like the design of that dress”)’ (Walker, 1990). In a more open definition, design is the process of conceiving and planning a set of actions to reach a goal (Hevner et al., 2004; Papanek, 1971; Mau, 2007).

“

In a more open definition, design is the process of conceiving and planning a set of actions to reach a goal

”

More recently, the adoption of design practices in business schools has also given popularity to the term ‘design thinking’, a way of perceiving, understanding and interacting with the world typical of designers, but that can also be acquired as a skill by nondesigners (Kimbell, 2012).

While the goal may be of different nature, for example, to improve the seating experience in private housings or to reimagine the delivery services in the age of big data, to design is to consciously modify the existent in order to improve it. Therefore, design may intervene in a wide range of areas and take on many shapes: a product, a system or an experience. In addition to its capacity to develop insights on any topic, and to find applications in many forms, design is by its nature a discipline that works in multidisciplinary settings. It looks into, relies on, and also pushes the limits of knowledge and expertise of diverse professions relevant to the project needs, with the purpose of building new solutions.

This chapter discusses the possible contributions of design to produce, and also to drive, evidence for policymaking. The intent is not to define a generic design for policy activity but rather to share a design for policy as it is pursued in the EU Policy Lab. Since its in-house integration, design has tackled many different topics and has played a role at different steps of the



policy cycle. Design has been called upon to reach out to unsolicited stakeholders, to facilitate cocreation of problem definition and solution finding, to bring about novel and customised project approaches and to produce insights that contribute to other fields' research and analyses. This chapter starts with a presentation of the EU Policy Lab to then go into more detail on the added value of design for policymaking.

The EU Policy Lab

The EU Policy Lab has been created in 2016 at the Joint Research Centre Unit on Foresight, Modelling, Behavioural Insights and Design for Policy. The EU Policy Lab is a space for exploration (of the future), experimentation (in the present), openness (to citizen's voices) and understanding (of people's actions and reactions). With a people-centred approach, the lab acts all along the policy cycle: from ideation to implementation and evaluation.

The Lab is composed of a multidisciplinary team organized under four main competences: Foresight, Behavioural Insights, Design for Policy and most recently Modelling. By accessing diverse areas of knowledge, the EU Policy Lab team strives to cocreate, test and prototype ideas to address complex social problems and to enable collective change. The work undertaken can be as much targeted to specific project purposes or to improving internal capacities of the Joint Research Centre and the European Commission as a whole.

The Lab brings together various stakeholders and actors to explore issues and to jointly code-sign solutions through experimental, i.e., custom-made processes. Thanks to the complementarity of its disciplines that comprise the EU Policy Lab, along with the specific backgrounds and areas of expertise of each member of the unit, a wide range of resources is made available. The diversity of competences and tools allows to produce an integrated set of insights for each EU Policy Lab intervention. With focus given to people and behaviours, to weak signals and innovation and to systems thinking and patterns, the Lab develops opportunities to respond to different types of policy needs.

By triggering recognition for our competences across Commission Services and building trust with our partners, the EU Policy Lab is in a unique position to support sensitive phases of the policymaking process and generate restricted open conversations.

The EU Policy Lab's physical space encourages novel activities to take place, all of which have as the underlying aim of raising awareness and providing hands on experience on new types of interfaces between policy, science and society. The EU Policy Lab is promoting new ways of working that combine more engagement and collaboration, innovation and experimentation, visual thinking, attention to people and behaviours, system thinking and anticipation. As a 'safe place', the EU Policy Lab allows to slow down, take a step back, unpack meanings and understandings and provide room for tests, trials and unknowns. For that purpose, a range of unconventional activities, from an EU policymaking perspective, are tapped into, such as public and bottom-up innovation, open and citizen science and Do-It-Yourself/Do-It-Together trends, as well as other fiction and speculative practices. Design, by its nature, affords all of the above to take place, by ensuring a reflection on both the physical and the conceptual components of a project. The following part will describe in more detail the qualities of design applied to policymaking.



Design for Policy

Design is a creative practice commonly used in discussions around innovation: in management, organizational studies and social change fields of research. Recognized as a strategic tool, design is equipped with a creative tool set and mindset: 'As part of their education process, [designers] develop skills in creativity (i.e., original thinking), in idea generation, in problem solving creatively, and in innovation and design (i.e., taking ideas through to a finished product)' (Cooper and Press, 1995). Thus, not only can design bring creativity to the policymaking cycle but it can also contribute in a meaningful way to the production of knowledge and insights.

Design has increasingly been referenced in the management literature to describe both the expanding roles of designers, for example, 'facilitator of communication' (Press and Cooper, 2003), and the increasing acknowledgement of areas of application, such as design for social innovation (Manzini, 2013) or design for critical thinking (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Along these lines, the type of design practiced at the EU Policy Lab acts at different levels of the policy cycle and of the organisation itself. Focus is given to people's actions, means, knowledge and values; to scientific discoveries and new technologies and to the use of visual representations to exchange, create and think in systemic ways.

In Practice

The core services of the EU Policy Lab followed by a list of standardised services led by the Design for Policy team are described below, all of which have demonstrated the power to produce useful evidence, information and insights for policymaking.

Exploring issues by broadening people's vision of the present and providing a holistic view of policy challenges through multidisciplinary and collaborative observation and sensemaking; by bringing to the center of attention a panel of viewpoints and perspectives on a given topic or issue and by pushing people to become aware of their cognitive biases, design participates in thickening one's understanding of the present, what Fish and Scrivener have described as '**amplifying the mind's eye**' (Fish and Scrivener, 1990). For example, colleagues from the digital and business departments came to us to renew their perspective after a year of working on the issue on platform to business trading practices in the online platform. The support we provided allowed for both teams to take a step back from their 1-year endeavor. Two exploratory sessions were held, providing a whole new perspective to the issue. The focus shifted from a platform to business relation to a platform to business to user perspective. In doing so, the solution space expanded with the rise of new pain points and leverage points. In this sense, the exploration phase provides means for opening up one's perception, knowledge and possibilities for action. Design here is used to accompany a project team, an audience or a person, in being aware of the assumptions, i.e., the frames they use to construct meaning and to make sense of the world. 'Design can be understood as a practice of re-framing the real, not in absolute or oppositional terms but reinforcing the complexity and open-endedness of experience' (Mallol, 2012).

Experiencing lean and effective processes to inform policymaking and placing the experience of users and citizens at the centre of the policymaking process; this activity may be



“

Design can be understood as a practice of re-framing the real, not in absolute or oppositional terms but reinforcing the complexity and open-endedness of experience'

”

related to human-centred and social design, understood as the consideration, implication and translation of the explicit and tacit knowledge people carry with them on any given topics. The aim of design in bringing in the voice of the people is twofold; on the one hand it is about ensuring shared understanding within an internal team and on the other hand it is about gathering input from a large range of people, including ones external to the project. Including people (to not limit ourselves to a definition of citizens) can be done at different

scales and in different formats depending on the project. The setting invites people to share input and generate knowledge and to experience an interactive process based on visual and manual activities. The design for Policy activity relies on this activity to ensure that all issues are tackled in line with people's needs, bearing an inclusive and open-minded approach. Creating bridges between European policy officers and decision-makers and the Europe-wide citizens who are affected by the laws ensures the effectiveness of the policy creation and implementation. More on this can be found in [Chapter 8](#).

Experimenting and pretesting options and solutions, using prototyping; experimentation is a fundamental aspect of design-led processes. By producing processes that are fit to the specific needs of the project, design produces unique and novel approaches. The two main types of productions that have been tested and approved are service design and speculative design approaches. Service design may improve the competence of a policy team in delivering work, as well as ensuring effective crossing and binding of information across different commission departments. The aim is to improve the quality of a service in order to make its use more efficient and enjoyable. The transformation strategies used in service design focus on the relationships between service provider and the users of the service. Speculative design on the other hand operates transitions from the science and technology fields to our daily realities ([Auger, 2013](#)). Therefore, the possible applications and implications of advanced technologies such as blockchain, which in many aspects is very abstract to many, become more tangible through the materiality of an object. A project we worked on at the EU Policy Lab produced six design prototypes that illustrated possible applications of blockchain in our daily lives, from a traceable healthcare system that delivers blood by drone to a hair dryer regulating your energy consumption based on your cryptoactivity, all projects that served as prompts to analyse business opportunities and impacts of blockchain technology in the future. But the use of prototypes is not limited to testing new technologies, it may also be used to trigger in the audience new questions, relationships and behaviours with a topic or a product.

Explaining visually the underlying concepts, ideas, evidence and data behind policy options and adopting novel forms of sensemaking and reporting. **Visual thinking** serves the purpose of exploring (opening up possibilities), understanding (collectively or individually) and communicating (informing, disseminating and provoking dialogue). To think through shapes and representations in a nonlinear way is a designerly skill. 'Designing is intellectual arrangement, clarification of links, definition of dependencies, creation of weighing's, and requires a special ability in the head of the designer to be able to see and fix analogies, links and frames



of reference'¹ (Aicher, 1991). During the creative process, experimental and iterative graphical and spatial representations are enabled to foster new meanings and allow shapes to emerge. At the EU Policy Lab, maps and other graphical representation are used in parallel with verbal and written exchanges in order to reveal and cover different levels of understanding. The use of visual communication (be it 2D or 3D) is a fundamental activity across all previously described EU Policy Lab services of exploring, experiencing and experimenting.

The Design for Policy activity plays a leading role in providing innovative types of evidence for policymaking by infusing transformation through design culture. Establishing a design culture within the organization is about infusing a way of doing that 'challenges the way in which people interact, the existing capabilities and how things are accomplished in daily activities' (Deserti and Rizzo, 2015). In order to do so, design uses insights, empathy, divergent thinking and visual representational tools such as drawing and form giving. Colleagues new to the design discipline have to go through a learning process to understand the benefits of a creative process for their daily work. In the following, services are listed the set of more specific services:

- **Exploratory sessions:** standardised half-day sessions with involved partners to explore and reframe specific policy challenges. The session should refine the understanding of defined problems and tackle ill-defined problems in order to open up the process to be implemented, to better identify gaps and enlarge the solution space.
- **State of the art research:** state of the art based on visual inputs, media, etc., to complement and better contextualize traditional literature reviews. Design develops cognitive capabilities that allow them to tap into different types of reference, cultural and scientific. Mixing the resources allows for making sense of relevant current trends that impact societies.
- **Stakeholder/user/citizen engagement workshops:** developing and maintaining a hybrid space where policymakers can interact and engage with members of the civil society in lab sessions, to gather experience of relevant communities and sense the state of play in civil society. This can be done in different ways, notably by mobilizing the EU Policy Lab design lab network across Europe.
- **Tailored project processes and formats:** fit-to-purpose, one-of-a-kind experimental project processes that comprise different levels of engagement with 'inside' and 'outside' participants. The aim is to produce innovative formats for solving issues in order to impact a targeted audience and spread research findings to a larger audience. Formats used may be custom-made workshops, speculative prototypes or serious games to cite a few.
- **Support to internal process development:** user-centred support services to oversee internal procedures and processes in order to improve the workplace experience and the quality of the end products. This activity is human centred and aims at producing transformational change.

To conclude, design contributes to the organisation by bringing in a culture that enables iterative and visual tools that make sense of explicit and tacit knowledge. This allows producing evidence that is reactive to ongoing emerging changes. The lateral mode of thinking

¹Otl Aicher. Analogous and Digital (first published 1991), Ernst and Sohn, 2015.



“

Design contributes to the organisation by bringing in a culture that enables iterative and visual tools that make sense of explicit and tacit knowledge.

”

of design enhances the options for tackling an issue while being solution oriented. The experience we have developed at the EU Policy Lab allows us to claim that scientific organisations can do more relevant science by systematically engaging in design with all policy actors. Design for Policy in this sense should not be treated as a side activity but integrated in the organisation to ensure qualitative, unique and inclusive scientific research that creates bridges across diverse disciplines and stakeholders.