Knill, C., Steinebach, Y., & Zink, D. (2025). *Triage Bureaucracy. The Organizational Challenge of Implementing Growing Policy Stocks.* Cambridge University Press. Paperback, 356 pp., ISBN: 9781009665872

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Zusammenfassung: Das Buch *Triage Bureaucracy* von Knill, Steinebach und Zink untersucht in vergleichender Perspektive, wie bürokratische Organisationen in sechs europäischen Ländern (Dänemark, Deutschland, England, Italien, Irland und Portugal) aufgrund von mangelnden Ressourcen und wachsenden politischen Anforderungen gezwungen sind, Prioritäten bei der Umsetzung von Umwelt- und Sozialpolitiken zu setzen. Die Autoren zeigen, wie sich Unterschiede in der politisch-administrativen Struktur der Länder und zwischen Umwelt- und Sozialpolitik darauf auswirken, wie öffentliche Verwaltungen unterschiedlich auf diese Herausforderung reagieren. Das Buch ist exzellent in seiner theoretischen Ambition und seiner empirischen Basis. ‚Policy Triage' ist nicht nur wichtig für unser Verständnis bürokratischer Organisationen – es ist zentral für Fragen der demokratischen Legitimation des Staates. Das Buch regt zu weiterer Forschung zu der Triage-Thematik an, insbesondere zu formalen und informalen organisationellen Antworten auf politische Überforderung – sei es in Form von ‚Risikoregistern' oder der Existenz von sogenannten Tabu-Themen. Dieses Buch leistet einen wichtigen Beitrag zur Erforschung der Zukunftsfähigkeit der öffentlichen Verwaltung.

Concerns with the capacity of bureaucracies to 'deliver' have become an ever-present feature in contemporary research and practice. Politicians are seeking to place ever-growing demands on their implementation agencies without sufficiently resourcing them for the task. What might look initially as an election winner – grand announcements without tax increases – generates long-term disillusionment and de-legitimisation. In the context of these debates, Knill, Steinebach, and Zink's *Triage Bureaucracy* is an important contribution to the field of comparative public administration. It develops the theoretical concept of 'policy triage', and applies this concept to two domains — environmental and social policy — in the context of six European jurisdictions. The overall contribution is therefore one that is theoretically ambitious and empirically rich.

The idea behind a triaging bureaucracy stems from a range of sources, starting with the extensive literature on policy succession and government overload that featured prominently in the literature of the 1970s; the extensive literature of barely coping street-level bureaucrats; and the concern with the ever-growing 'stock' of policies that pose implementation problems in view of limited resources. The idea of 'triaging' highlights the need for organisations to make choices; these can be either implicit or explicit. As noted by Knill, Steinebach, and Zink, the idea of the 'triage' comes from the health setting; organisations and individuals need to decide, in moments of resource shortage, which patients deserve access to particular resources, leaving others, at worst, to die.

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The idea that public organisations are also placed in tricky triage situations is very persuasive. Knill, Steinebach and Zink argue that the degree to which organisations are placed in a triaging situation depends on the wider environment, whether politics can get away with granting an agency insufficient resources, whether an agency can find resources elsewhere or whether they are able to 'compensate' by being able to reshuffle resources from elsewhere. Such context provides for expectations as to whether the frequency and intensity of policy triage is expected to be high, medium or low.

The initial chapters' conceptual and theoretical explorations are explored in the context of environmental and social delivery and regulatory organisations in Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Portugal. The chapters provide for a rich comparative analysis – the contextual setting is well-described, the extent and type of triage decision-making is explored, and there is a strong appreciation of national and sub-national administrations. The chapters speak to each other, and one gets a good sense of how interviewees understood the notion of 'policy triage' and applied it to their day-to-day life. It is evident that different European administrative organisations, more in the environmental than the social domain, experience, in different ways, a mismatch between policy demands and their ability to address them. However, the chapters of national experiences would have deserved a more comprehensive cross-national analysis than provided in chapter 10.

This is a very good book that allows the reader to consider a range of ways in which to expand on the important insights provided. One can recognise the importance of policy triage across national and sectoral administrative settings that is shaped by, but also goes beyond administrative or welfare state tradition. One potential avenue for further consideration is the extent to which different organisations are expected to have formal provisions as to how to triage (which in themselves might constitute a blame management device) or whether the exercise of a 'triage' is part of an organisational culture that might even constitute a so-called taboo topic – a topic that everyone is aware of, but has to remain 'unspoken' as it might cause embarrassment to an organisation's leadership.

In the context of this volume, the national and sectoral exploration could have explored further the extent to which formal statements as to the appetite for triaging exist. After all, the contemporary fascination with risk-based frameworks and the call for explicit 'risk appetite' statements touch on the core issues of interest in Knill, Steinebach, and Zink's study, namely how organisations prioritise some issues rather than others in the face of dwindling resources. This could have been explored further on the basis of the rich interview material that the authors bring to the table. There are also issues about organisational leadership and the extent to which individual decision-makers not just feel aggrieved by the extent to which they need to triage in the face of demand overload, but also by the extent to which such overload is acknowledged by the organisational leadership. Indeed, it is likely that policy triage is 'experienced' in a range of ways – one might be about having to neglect issues of core policy substance; in other cases, this might be about discomfort of not being sufficiently resourced to appropriately assess a particular case; and in other areas, this might involve dislike of organisational means to 'support' decision-making (such as malfunctioning IT platforms).

The book argues that governments should more carefully consider measures to administer the stock and flow of policy measures – including mechanisms to mitigate against policy growth. However, and the final paragraphs of this book already point towards such a future in the United States (one that might already have occurred in the austerity years in England in the environmental domain), what if the political goal is not state legitimacy but delegitimisation?

In other words, how do we think about policy triage in a world where the political agenda is one of creating ever more ‘triage’ situations? This reader – and, one suspects, the authors of this highly valuable volume – would not welcome such a future. However, the future of public administration is possibly one in which triage decisions across sectors might become more common as part of a deliberate political agenda than the authors of this book may wish to acknowledge.

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