

FROM ‘SYSTEMATIC’ TO ‘SYSTEMIC’ RESEARCH AND POLICY ANALYSIS – PROGRESSING THE APPLICATION OF SYSTEMS APPROACHES TO POLICY EVALUATIONS AT A EUROPEAN UNION RESEARCH AGENCY (EUROFOUND)

Barbara Schmidt-Abbey

Background, motivation and research aim

This study explores the relevance and applicability of using systems approaches to enhance policy evaluation projects conducted by [Eurofound](#) (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions). This European Union (EU) agency is mandated to support European policymakers in their endeavours to improve the working and living conditions in Europe, by providing “*scientifically sound and unbiased, high quality information*” (Eurofound, 2012, p. 9).

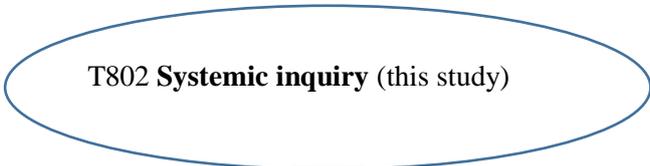
One of Eurofound’s activities to achieve its mission is described as ‘*exploring and assessing policies and practices*’ in the subject areas it covers (Eurofound, 2012, p. 18). This activity is the main area of interest for this study, with particular attention to ‘assessing policies’, interpreted as forms of policy evaluation.

How can evaluation of such policies be accomplished as part of Eurofound’s role, and give justice to the complexities of the policies assessed and multiple perspectives and stakes involved?

The overall aim of this research was to investigate the effectiveness of current approaches and methods in policy evaluation activities of complex social policies and phenomena undertaken by Eurofound, and to test the ‘systemic desirability and cultural feasibility’ (Checkland, 1990) of moving beyond a ‘first-order science’ research tradition within Eurofound to advance opportunities for applying systems concepts and approaches in these activities.

Methodology

The chosen case study was the project ‘*Delivering public services: a greater role for the private sector? Hospital services*’ (Eurofound, 2015a, p. 39). This project aims to analyse the ‘*implications of privatisation for access, quality and effectiveness of services*’ in the hospital sector across EU Member States. This situation features a number of ‘complex’ characteristics. To test the usefulness and applicability of selected systems approaches was the aim of the action research implemented in this case study. The relationships of the different levels of analysis are illustrated in the figure below:



T802 Systemic inquiry (this study)

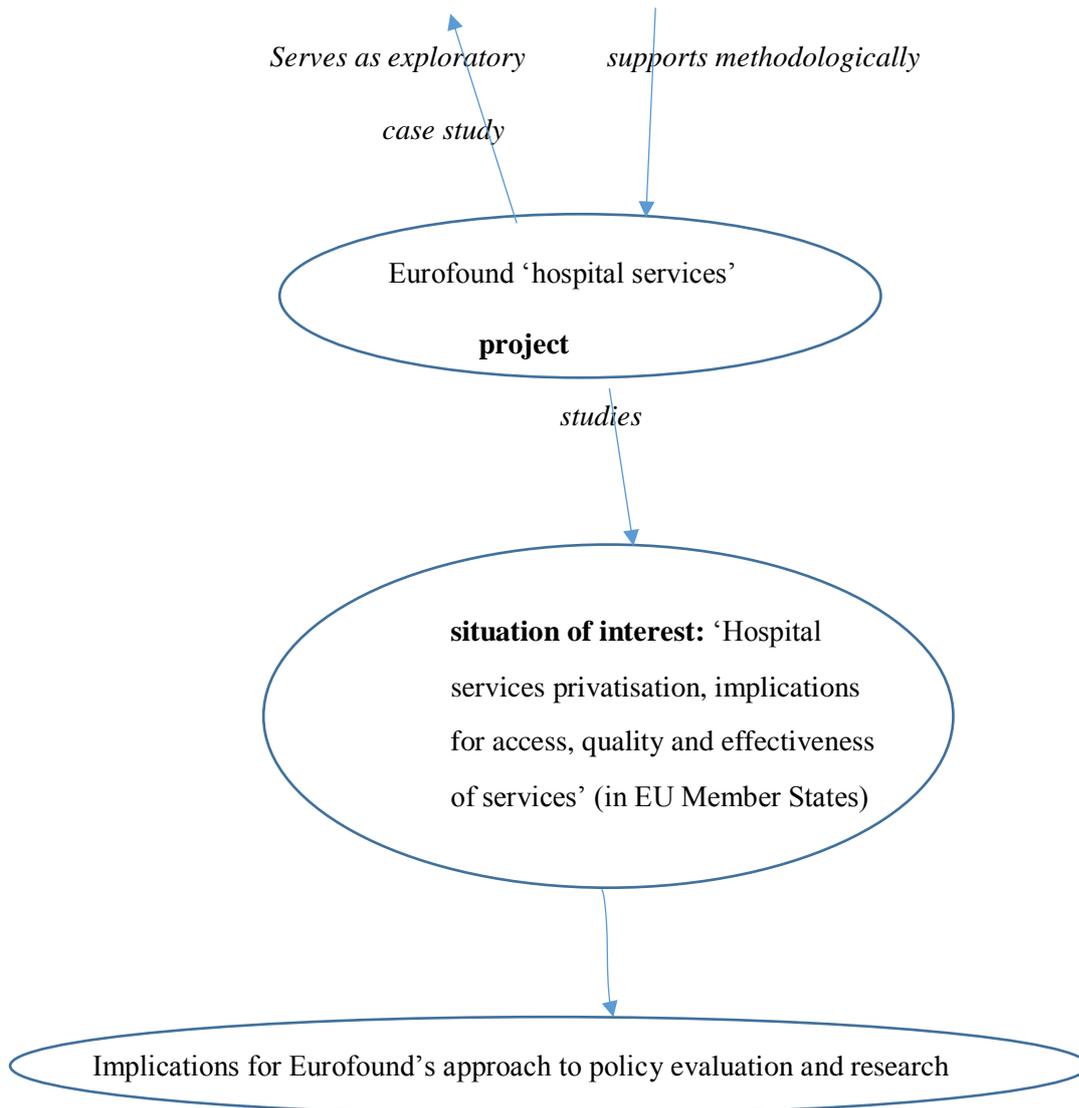


Figure 1: Systems map: relationships between different levels of analysis relevant for this thesis

Source: Based on the author's research.

During the systemic inquiry, several **participatory action research** activities were conducted:

1. Workshop 1:

- a. Rich picture exploration of situation 'privatisation of hospital services' from different perspectives;
- b. Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) analyses (social and power analysis; CATWOE, root definitions);
- c. Critical Systems Heuristics (CSH) boundary reflection, boundary critique.

2. Workshop 2: mapping of identified stakeholder groups to research methods

3. Workshop 3: Joint reflections on implications both for the 'hospital services' project, and for policy evaluation and research projects in Eurofound in general.

4. **Validation interviews** with Eurofound research staff concerning general implications in Eurofound and beyond.

Key results

A number of analytical artefacts were produced during the workshop exercises which helped the project team participants to achieve a deeper understanding of the situation of interest of ‘privatisation of hospital services in the EU’, including the following for illustration:

1. Rich pictures about ‘privatisation of hospital services’ situation of interest (see figure 2):

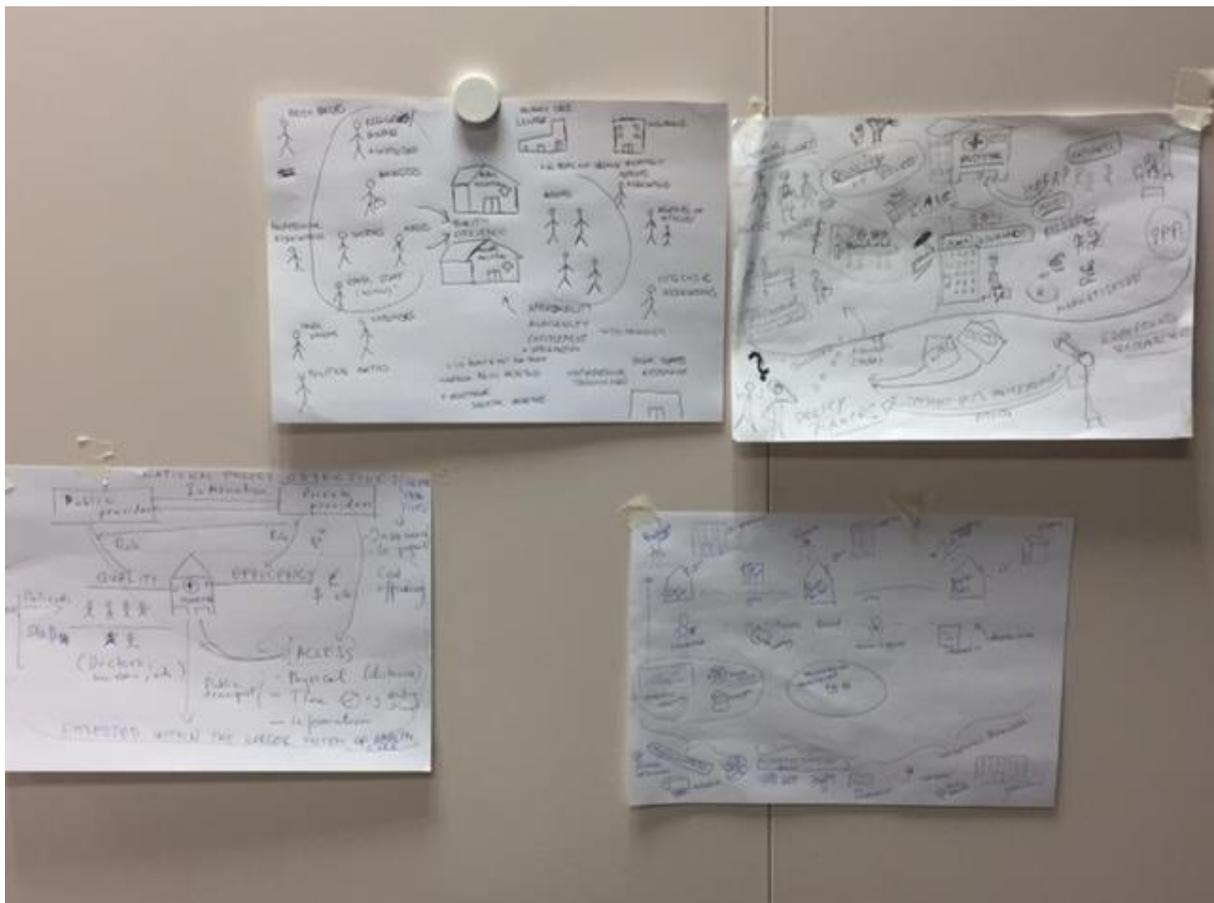


Figure 2: Overview – rich pictures produced during workshop

Source: photograph taken at Workshop 1, rich pictures produced by participants.

2. Analyses of actors and stakeholders (social, power and CATWOE analyses)
3. Critical boundary reflections and critique of stakeholders, stakes and worldviews of stakeholders in the situation (using CSH)
4. A systems boundary diagram for ‘hospital services’ project (see figure 3).

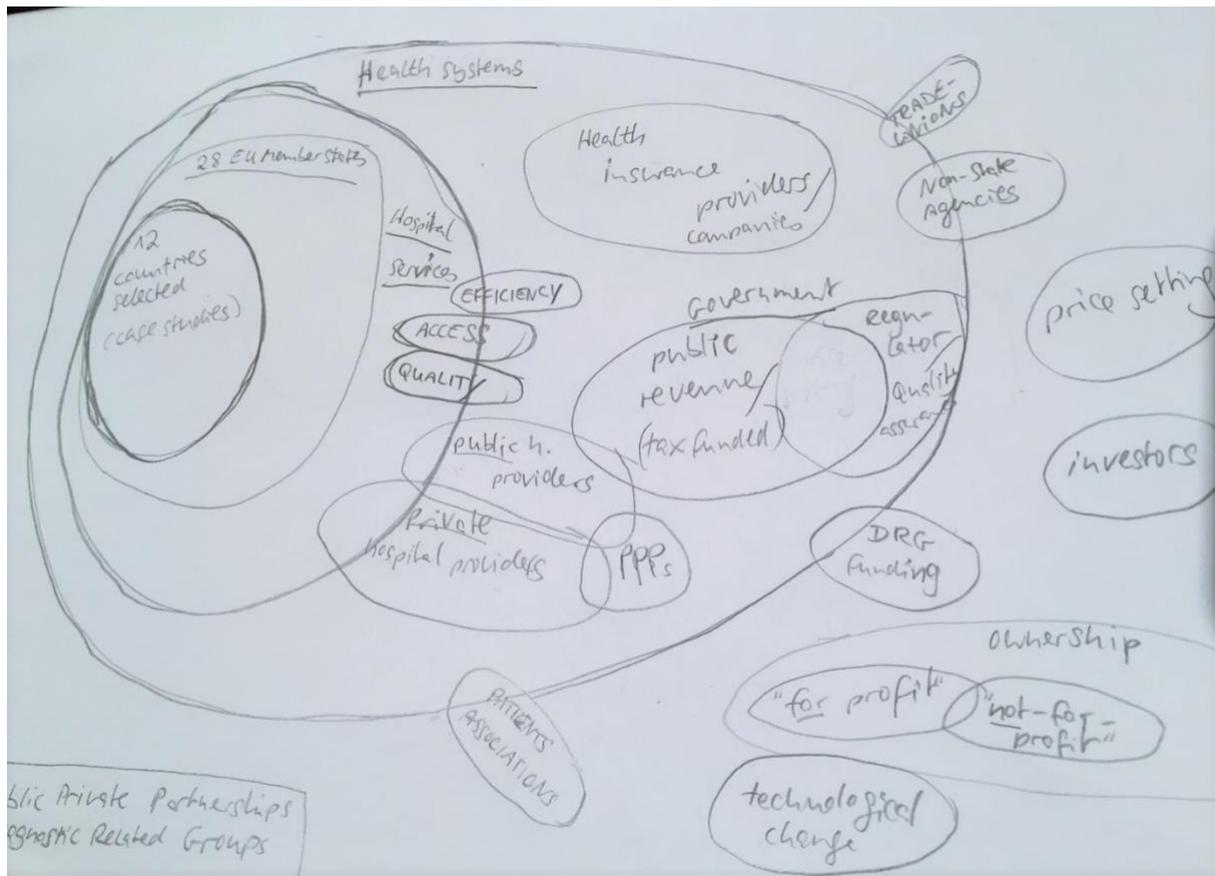


Figure 3: Systems boundary diagram: Privatisation of hospital services in the EU – concepts and actors relevant to the research project

Source: own drawing, summarising outcome of Workshop 1.

In terms of the efficacy and effectiveness of the techniques used in Workshop 1, the result was mixed. Some techniques worked better than others: whilst rich picture exploration and boundary reflections and critique with CSH were considered to be very useful and providing value for the project team, other techniques were more difficult to engage with, for example the cultural enquiry stream techniques of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM). One reason for the difficulties was the mode of application – templates prepared to assist the workshop exercises turned out to be constraints leading to sequential completion rather than as tools for reflection. Once the templates were abandoned, a shift of application was achieved, and the analytical questions explored conversationally. This ‘Mode 2’ use of these SSM techniques were experienced as more meaningful than procedural ‘Mode 1’ application by participants, confirming Checkland and Scholes (1990, p. 280), and suggests that the way how methods are used and in which context is as important as the methodology itself.

Conclusions

The experience in the ‘hospital services’ case has shown that the standard approach is not always sufficient for a deeper understanding of a situation to be researched at the start of a project. The experience and validation interviews with researchers suggested that there could be real value for research and policy evaluation projects in Eurofound to embed systemic inquiry streams into the overall project design, under some conditions:

- For projects with wide and fuzzy scope (boundary explorations to inform research questions);
- Where new territory is explored (exploratory social learning and scoping);
- In complex policy situations with diverse and multiple stakeholders (interrelationships and multiple perspectives).

Whilst it would be ‘systemically desirable’ to broaden a systemic approach to researching similar policies with shared characteristics, there are institutional barriers to the ‘cultural feasibility’, as the mainstream way of conducting research continues to dominate and imposes important constraints to such opportunities. These consist in short research project cycle times, and pressures to deliver results fast, leaving little time and scope for reflexivity and exploratory methods. Additionally, introducing systems approaches into policy evaluation projects exposes paradigmatic and epistemic tensions. The default way of doing research and evaluation projects ‘systematically’ sits uncomfortably with systemic approaches, which implicitly challenge the conventional way of framing and approaching research inquiries. This experience resonates with Argyris’ and Schön’s ‘theory of action’, in which there is a gap between a ‘theory in use’ (the ‘normal’ ways things are done in organisations) compared to ‘espoused theory’ (what is claimed to be done in rhetoric), (Argyris and Schön (1974, 1978, 1996), Argyris (1990). What Eurofound states in its work programme is one thing (‘to assess policies and practices’) (‘espoused theory’), however, in practice it currently falls short of this ambition, as the standard approaches for normal research projects continue to be used (for example standard case study methodology).

In order to move forward from this, a ‘shift’ will be needed. As suggested by Argyris and Schön, this calls for ‘double-loop’ learning to bring about transformational change in the organisational and academic culture in research organisations like Eurofound, and to dissolve the contradictions and ‘organisational defensive routines’. This will require time, and finding and engaging further ‘allies’ across the organisation to pursue this aim. Opportunities exist at several levels:

1. Transfer the experiences from the ‘hospital services’ project to other projects and researchers, through internal conversations about these experiences.
2. Raise this discussion in the ‘official discourse’ in the organisation, to increase interest in ‘reflexivity’ and give it legitimacy within the ‘projectified world’ of the organisation.

3. A future research methodology development group might provide space to enhance the methodological frameworks of the agency.
4. Further explorations could be conducted within the context of the EU Agencies' 'Network for Scientific Advice' (EU-ANSA, 2015), on how systemic approaches could be used by other agencies to enhance their scientific processes for policy areas with systemic and complex characteristics, such as inter-relationships, multiple perspectives and boundary judgements.

[1,264 words]

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