Bureaucracy may be the solution, rather than the problem, for issues of European governance

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The European Union is often criticised from the perspective that it has created a layer of bureaucracy or 'red tape' which has a damaging effect on European governance. **Martin Lodge** *and* **Kai Wegrich** *write that while it is particularly common for political parties to make these arguments in the run up to European elections, legitimate and effective administration is at the heart of addressing the key governance challenges European countries must face in the future. They argue that any meaningful discussion about bureaucracy should focus on the question of 'why' certain interventions seem to work, and not simply on 'what' initiatives have previously worked in other contexts.*

European Parliament elections offer politicians and national electorates the opportunity to voice their concerns about 'Brussels bureaucracy', 'red tape' and many other perceived forms of mis-government that are invariably attributed to the European Union. If, however, we have learned one thing about the financial crisis, then it is that EU governance matters, not just in terms of the intricate decision-rules that occupy EU-watchers day and night. Instead, it is a question of how governance can be organised in systems where power is widely dispersed, not just between the EU and national jurisdictions, but also among varied forms of public and private bureaucracy. Furthermore, this dispersion takes place in a context of a high degree of interdependence: if financial regulation in one setting fails, then other national regulatory systems will bear the consequences. Similar problems occur elsewhere, such as in food safety or migration.

The discussion about the future of the EU hardly touches on the capacities required to deal with the governance challenges that European societies face over the coming decades. Such challenges include the financial crisis and the revival of economies post-crisis, demography and how European welfare states can deal with potentially exploding health care costs as populations age dramatically, and how European societies can address the potentially growing costs of changing weather patterns brought about through climate change. Furthermore, other challenges relate to the role of infrastructures, such as those for energy, broadband and transport more generally. There is, admittedly, a degree of consensus as to what these governance challenges might be, as round tables, national action plans, workshops and task forces are announced, and then rarely remembered once they have reported.

Credit: Jim Killock (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The depressing feature of these debates is the absence of any consideration of what capacities might be required to deal with these challenges. Instead, attention is directed to supposedly innovative and potentially transformative new technologies. For example, much is being said about the transformative character of 'big data' (or 'open' data, as some still suggest without much irony). It is questionable whether technology will offer the 'breakthrough' transformation to deal with health care costs for dementia-ridden patients. Much less has been said about the capacities required by public bureaucracies to regulate, organise, and finance such 'breakthrough' technologies, let

alone understand their effects.

Others claim that faith should be placed in 'markets', without much consideration as to what 'markets' are, how they should be regulated, what kind of business conduct is likely to emerge, and which risks will be tolerated or not. Those who put all their money on 'collaboration', 'networks' and (inevitably) 'collaborative innovations' usually have a difficult time explaining what role public bureaucracy needs to play in terms of establishing access and decision-rules for potential participants. At best, bureaucracy is considered as one of the 'barriers' that needs to be overcome. The realisation of the full potential of seamless collaboration across organisational boundaries seems to be only one step away – prevented by turf-obsessed bureaucrats and politicians who are alleged to have an almost passionate attachment to 'silos'.

In other words, bureaucracy is usually seen as a problem. One standard response to introduce rationality into bureaucratic policy-making has been to rely on 'impact assessments', those documents that generate considerable work when political salience is low, and that are ignored when political salience is high. Impact assessments are supposed to guide bureaucracies to pursue only those options that are most efficient (in terms of 'bang for buck'), most rational (in terms of evidence) and most endorsed by interested parties (via consultation). Whatever the merits of seeking to inject some additional form-filling into the decision-making process, impact assessments hardly ask the right questions about the pre-requisites as to why some forms of intervention might work in some places rather than others.

What is missing in such 'impact assessments' is the administrative factor; instead, administration is merely reduced to a 'measurement' of 'administrative burdens'. In a world that is keen to know 'what works', there has been too little interest in the question 'why does this work'. As outlined in the Hertie School of Governance's Governance Report 2014, a discussion that focused on 'why does this work' rather than 'what works' would be a far smarter way to go about dealing with governance challenges. It would move attention away from blind copying of initiatives that may have worked in one place at one time, but may never work again in any other context. Instead, the focus would be on the 'why'.

Asking the 'why does this work' question, also directly links to the question about 'what is required to make it work'. Of course, this will raise questions about necessary resources: finance, legal bases, information – and different degrees of public bureaucracy. The next step then is to ask: what kind of bureaucracy is needed? Basic competencies that are likely to be required are those of (i) analysis, the ability to process, understand and interpret information, (ii) regulation, the ability to control and oversee other parties, (iii) co-ordination, the ability to bring together different parties, and (iv) delivery, the ability to make something happen, especially when other parties fail.

Asking politicians and voters to talk about bureaucracy in an informed way may be wishful thinking. But when election night is over, campaign posters and leaflets have been stuffed into recycling sacks, and political careers have been kick-started or bitten the dust, it is time to begin a proper debate about the kind of administration that is required to deal with the governance challenges of the future. The Governance Report 2014 seeks to make a contribution to this debate about the legitimacy and effectiveness of European governance.

Such debates will not please those with toolkits and fancy diagrams to sell. However, such debates are likely to be more fruitful in generating legitimate and effective European governance than debating the inter-institutional interplay among Brussels-based organisations, or bemoaning the absenteeism of Eurosceptic parties in the European Parliament.

This article also appeared at the Hertie School of Governance's European Elections blog. The Governance Report 2014 will be launched at an LSE event on 10 June.

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