

# An exploration of the theoretical concepts policy windows and policy entrepreneurs at the Swedish public health arena

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## SUMMARY

*In John Kingdon's Policy Streams Approach policy formation is described as the result of the flow of three 'streams', the problem stream, the policy stream and the politics stream. When these streams couple, a policy window opens which facilitate policy change. Actors who promote specific solutions are labelled policy entrepreneurs. The aim of this study was to test the applicability of the Policy Streams Approach by verifying whether the theoretical concepts 'policy windows' and 'policy entrepreneurs' could be discernable in nine specified cases. Content analyses of interviews and documents related to child health promoting measures in three Swedish municipalities were performed and nine case studies were written. The policy processes preceding the municipal*

*measures and described in the case studies were scrutinized in order to find statements related to the concepts policy windows and policy entrepreneurs. All conditions required to open a policy window were reported to be present in eight of the nine case studies, as was the most important resource of a policy entrepreneur, sheer persistence. This study shows that empirical examples of policy windows and policy entrepreneurs could be identified in child health promoting measures in Swedish municipalities. If policy makers could learn to predict the opening of policy windows, the planning of public health measures might be more straightforward. This also applies to policy makers' ability to detect actors possessing policy entrepreneur resources.*

*Key words:* policy development; implementation; applicability; community health promotion

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## INTRODUCTION

Policymakers concerned with health promotion, as well as with other topics, do not always know where policies come from (John, 2003). As a means to reveal the development of policy processes, John Kingdon presented the Policy Streams Approach in his book *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, first published 1984 (Kingdon, 1995). Kingdon describes policy formation as the result of three kinds of processes, or the flow of three

'streams', the problem stream, the policy stream and the politics stream. *The problem stream* regards public matters requiring attention. Obviously, a long list of problems could be advocated to national governments or municipal administrations. Far from all problems are, however, given attention to by the decision makers. Some conditions are not even defined as problems until there is something to do about it, i.e. there is a solution (a policy) available and recognized by the politicians. *The policy stream* regards proposals for

change. Before a problem can reach the decision agenda, decision makers must be given at least one alternative solution, worked out and ready to put in place. Politicians concerned with an array of problems will prioritize to act on the ones where the administration, the scientific community, or somebody else, could provide a constructive solution, often worked out in advance. Finally, *the politics stream* is composed of political issues, e.g. election results, changes of administration, interest group campaigns or changes in public opinions. The three streams develop independent from each other. They are for the most part unrelated, but when they couple, i.e. when simultaneously a problem is recognized, a solution is available, and the political climate is positive for change, a window of opportunity, *a policy window*, opens which facilitate policy change. The process is very dynamic with several solutions floating around, ready to couple with problems appearing in any moment. This also explains why many potential issues never are lifted on the decision agenda, i.e. if a problem does not meet a proper solution in the right time nothing will happen.

Policy windows mostly open occasionally, and might not stay open very long. Thus, actors who promote a specific solution, the *policy entrepreneurs*, must act rapidly before the opportunity passes by, or they will have to wait until the next chance comes along.

Policy entrepreneurs are individuals who introduce and promote their ideas in many different fora and invest time and energy to increase the chances for an idea to be placed on the decision agenda (Kingdon, 1995). Policy entrepreneurs are active both in the problem stream and the policy stream. Politicians, civil servants, lobbyists and researchers could be policy entrepreneurs, but so could also private persons. Policy entrepreneurs may thus appear either inside or outside the organization where an idea is introduced. While decision makers often shift their attention from one problem to another, policy entrepreneurs keep to their issue. It is not enough with a problem, not even a pressing one, to get a subject on the decision agenda. A solution must be available within prompt and easy reach for the decision makers. Such solutions are often prepared by policy entrepreneurs. Even good proposals may, however, fail to be taken seriously if they are

presented before the policy community is ready. 'Softening up processes', implying to prepare and educate both the public and the specialists, are often driven by policy entrepreneurs. Thus, both the problem recognition and the suggested solutions could be results of policy entrepreneurs' efforts.

Kingdon attributes policy entrepreneurs some vital resources. The first resource is claim to a hearing, which means that an actor has an ability to speak for others, hold a decision-making position or possesses expertise. The second resource regards political connections or negotiating skills, implying a combination of technical expertise and political know-how. The third, and by Kingdon labelled the most important resource, is sheer persistence. This means that actors promote their ideas in all ways and in several fora, and are willing to invest large resources in order to promote their solutions.

Kingdon's Policy Streams Approach has been used as a conceptual framework in studies aimed to mirror the development of policy processes in different arenas (Zahariadis and Allen, 1995; Sardell and Johnson, 1998; Kruger, 2001; Laraway and Jennings, 2002; Blackman, 2005; Greathouse *et al.*, 2005; Ahearne, 2006; Ashford *et al.*, 2006; O'Sullivan and Lussier-zDuynstee, 2006; Odom-Forren and Hahn, 2006; Mannheim *et al.*, 2007). In the present study, the point of departure is the applicability of the Policy Streams Approach in child health promotion. The aim of the study was to analyse whether the concepts policy windows and policy entrepreneurs could be empirically verified in nine specified cases.

## METHODS

In this cross-sectional study, a data set comprising interviews and written documentation were examined using content analysis (Kvale, 1997) (Patton, 2002; Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). The policy processes preceding nine municipal health promoting measures were scrutinized in order to find statements related to the concepts policy windows and policy entrepreneurs. The idea was to trace policy processes backwards, starting from already realized and present measures. That an activity runs at all implies often, according to the Policy Streams Approach, that simultaneously a problem has been recognized, a solution has been available

and that the political context has been positive for change.

To identify a number of activities as starting points for backward mapping of policy processes, city managers in three Swedish municipalities were asked to select three health promoting measures each. The selection criteria were that the measures should be ongoing, broad and relevant to the health of children. This procedure resulted in a total of nine measures within the broad scope of public health that is prevailing in Sweden (Hogstedt *et al.*, 2004).

An extensive interview guide, based on several political science approaches (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1995; John, 1998), was elaborated. The theories were carefully selected in order to make it possible to focus the policy processes from different perspectives (Table 1). For example, socio-economic approaches focus on

social and economic factors as sources to set the agenda, rational choice theory focuses on individual choices as the foundation of political action and ideas-based approaches focus on how periods of stability are followed by periods of public interest, media scrutiny and public action. Thus, the Policy Streams Approach was one of several theories used to construct the interview guide during the initial part of the study (Table 1). The interviewer proceeded with the interviews using the snowball method (Morse, 1991) (Table 2). Written documentation related to each measure was collected. The interviews were performed and the written documentation was gathered during 2002–2003.

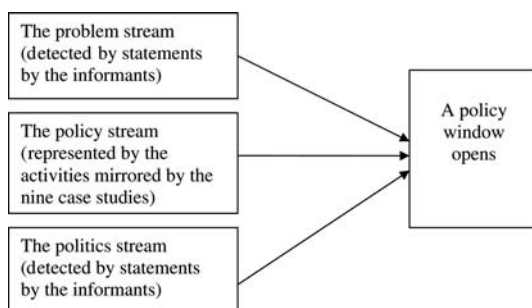
A policy process matrix, based on four stages of the policy process (including policy development, decision making, implementation and institutionalization) and the actor-structural

**Table 1:** Political science approaches applied in the interview guide

Political science approaches	Items in the interview guide
<i>Institutional approaches</i> Focuses on rule following within an institutional context, i.e. arenas within which policy-making takes place (political organizations, laws and rules)	Municipal organization/ reorganization Political majority and stability Political/administrative support/opposition Street level bureaucracy
<i>Socio-economic approaches</i> Focuses on social and economic factors as sources to set the agenda	Political majority and stability Economic crisis
<i>Group and network approaches</i> Focuses on relationships and interactions between policy participants	Formal and informal team working and interaction between actors Distribution of power
<i>Rational choice theory</i> Focuses on individual choices as the foundation of political action and inaction	Key persons Driving forces Personal interests
<i>Ideas-based approaches</i> Focuses on intentions and beliefs of the policy participants as reasons for policy change or stability	Key persons Driving forces Personal background Political majority and stability
<i>The punctuated equilibrium model</i> Focuses on how periods of stability are followed by periods of public interest, media scrutiny and public action	Triggering factors Political crisis Debate Mass media coverage Lobbying
<i>The policy streams approach</i> Focuses on the continual interplay and sharing of agendas between decision makers.	Policy windows Policy entrepreneurs

**Table 2:** The informants of nine case studies in three municipalities in Stockholm County

Case	Activity	Informants
Case 1: physical activity	Promotion of physical activity among children by organizing yearly sport contests	Chairman of a non-profit association Head of the municipal cultural and leisure activity administration
Case 2: growing-up conditions	Creation of favourable growing-up conditions for children by increased general support in school and during leisure time	Chairman of the social welfare committee Chairman of the educational committee Head of the cultural and leisure activity administration Head of the educational administration Head at the social welfare administration A public official at the cultural and leisure activity administration
Case 3: drug prevention	Decreasing the use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs among adolescents by organizing a contest ranging over school year 6	A project leader An administrative director An information secretary The chief of police Head of the social welfare administration A representative for a non-profit drug preventing association
Case 4: language development	Improvement of the Swedish language among children 3–5 years old, outside the pre-school system, and their mothers, by organizing a language-school	A pre-school director Head of the education administration The project leader A community planner Chairman of the educational committee Two pre-school teachers (interviewed together)
Case 5: traffic- and playground safety	Improvement of traffic- and playground safety, sun protection of pre-school children and an overall strengthening of children's right	Chairman of the technology committee Head of the technology administration Head of the traffic department The administrative secretary A landscape architect
Case 6: adolescents' influence	Increasing adolescents' political influence by establishing a municipal youth council	Vice-chairman of the municipal council Chairman of the education committee Two politicians Head of the education administration A headmaster An adolescent The project leader
Case 7: children with special needs	Establishing of a resource unit for children with special needs	The manager at the children and adolescent administration A psychologist at the children and adolescent administration Head at the resource unit A public official at the resource unit
Case 8: safety improvement	Improvement of municipal safety by elaborating a safety plan and establishing a safety council	The project leader The municipal commissioner A youth centre manager A public official A family centre leader A public health planner The chief of police
Case 9: adolescents' influence	Increased adolescent influence by offering an arena where adolescents can meet	An administrative official Head of the leisure administration A social welfare secretary The project leader



**Fig. 1:** When the problem stream, the policy stream and the politics stream couple a policy window opens (after Kingdon, 1995).

approach (assessing context, institution and actor) was constructed (Giddens, 1984; Lundquist, 1987; Rothstein, 1996; Buse *et al.*, 2005). The transcribed interviews and the documents related to each measure were categorized by using the policy process matrix. Based on the content in the matrix, nine case studies were written. This part of the study is more carefully described elsewhere (Guldbrandsson *et al.*, 2005). The case studies were examined using content analyses (Kvale, 1997). The authors read and coded each case independently. Policy windows were detected by statements related to the three streams: problems, policies and politics. As, obviously, nine ideas already had been realized, each measure was regarded as the policy part of the conditions needed to open a policy window (Figure 1). Presence of triggering problems and interrelated political processes, as well as presence of policy entrepreneurs, was traced by statements by the informants according to the definitions below.

### Definitions of the concepts (based on Kingdon, 1995)

A policy window may open when simultaneously a problem is recognized, a policy is available and the political context is positive for change:

- Problems are defined as public matters requiring attention, e.g. poor school results or increasing criminality.
- Policies are defined as proposals for change. The policies in this study were given from the start as each single case study describes a measure already in progress.
- Political processes are defined as policy-related local conditions, e.g. political

intentions or earmarked financial support (implicit showing political desire).

Actors in the policy process holding some of the following key resources are labelled policy entrepreneurs:

- Claim to a hearing: The actor has an ability to speak for others, holds a decision-making position or possesses expertise.
- Political connections or negotiating skills: The actor possesses a combination of technical expertise and political know-how.
- Sheer persistence: The actor promotes an idea in all ways and in several fora and invests time and other resources to promote his/her solution.

Politicians in general were assessed to possess claim to a hearing, while public officials and public authority representatives in general were assessed to possess political connections or negotiating skills. Any actor in the policy process, mentioned as important by the informants, could be assessed to possess the key resource sheer persistence. Thus, politicians, civil servants, lobbyists, researchers or private persons could be policy entrepreneurs.

### Data validity and coding reliability

Triangulation was used as a validating method when gathering the data (Nutbeam, 1998; Green and Thorogood, 2004). Sources of triangulation were interviews, written documentation and additional interviews with one respondent in each municipality who was not directly involved in the explicit cases, but expected to be generally well informed about ongoing projects in the municipality. The validating interviews were performed with two public health officials and one administrative director, respectively, in the three municipalities.

To assess the coding reliability, an independent re-coding was performed in three case studies (Kvale, 1996).

## RESULTS

Fifty interviews were carried out until saturation was accomplished. The number of interviews was thus governed by the snow ball method. Written documentation, represented by plans of actions, political motions, minutes, evaluations and NGO documents, e.g. a comprehensive

jubilee publication regarding case 1, was gathered. The nine case studies, shortly presented in Table 2 and more carefully described elsewhere (Guldbrandsson *et al.*, 2005), and the written documentation were examined in order to trace policy windows and policy entrepreneurs.

All the three conditions (presence of a problem, a policy and a related political process) required to open a policy window were reported to be present in eight of the nine cases (see Table 3). The only exception is case 1 for which no triggering problem was reported by the informants or found in the related documents.

Policy entrepreneurs are distinguished by the following resources: claim to a hearing, political connections or negotiating skills, and sheer persistence. Actors assessed to possess claim to a hearing were detected in seven cases, while actors assessed to possess political connections or negotiating skills were detected in eight cases (see Table 4). Sheer persistence, meaning that an actor strongly advocates an idea, and by Kingdon labelled the most important resource of policy entrepreneurs, was detected in eight of the nine cases (Table 4).

### Data validity and coding reliability

The triangulation sources complemented and validated each other and no contradictory information appeared. Thus, the written documentation and the three additional interviews with respondents not directly involved in each case confirmed what was revealed in the original interviews. The coding agreement between the original assessment and the re-coding of three cases was acceptable (77–85%).

## DISCUSSION

The theoretical concepts policy windows and policy entrepreneurs were visible in the policy process of nine child health promoting measures in three Swedish municipalities.

Of the three streams needed to be coupled to open a policy window (Figure 1), it was a precondition that the policy stream was present from start in all studies. The problem and politics streams were both found to be present in eight of the nine cases. Assessed presence of the problem and the politics streams are proved by citations (Table 3). As the case studies describe

measures that obviously were ongoing when this study was initiated the result seems to make sense. That the activities run at all implies that policy windows previously have been opened. The execution of the policy might, however, have been influenced by several factors and actors not revealed in this study. Another way to study whether opening of policy windows have preceded courses of events would have been to follow several problem, policy and politics streams in different contexts and wait for some of these to couple. However, this would be extremely difficult to perform as most of these streams exist for long time and the opening of policy windows is difficult to foresee.

Many actors were mentioned by the informants as present in the policy process. However, all actors mentioned are not of equal importance. The key resources claim to a hearing, political connections/negotiating skills and sheer persistence provided a means to highlight significant actors. Claim to a hearing imply that a person possesses expertise, an ability to speak for others or an authoritative decision-making position, i.e. capabilities that often characterize politicians. Political connections and negotiating skills, on the other hand, may often be attributed to public officials in higher levels of the organization. Thus, the coding of two of the key resources was standardized in the following manner. Politicians clearly present in the policy process were consistently assessed to possess claim to a hearing. Administration managers, public officials and public authority representatives clearly present in the policy process were consistently assessed to possess political connections or negotiating skills. Any actor involved in the policy process could, however, possess the most valuable key resource, sheer persistence. When actors in the policy process have been assessed to hold this characteristic, this is proved by citations (Table 4).

Case 1 differs from the other cases in several aspects. No triggering problem was mentioned by the informants, neither were actors with the policy entrepreneur resources claim to a hearing or policy connections/negotiating skills. However, actors possessing the policy entrepreneur resource sheer persistence were clearly pointed out by the informants. Case 1 represents a measure which has been going on since the early 60s, which may mirror Kingdon's statement that sheer persistence is the most significant policy entrepreneur resource (Kingdon, 1995). In case 7, the policy entrepreneur



**Table 3:** Detecting policy windows: the policy-, problem- and politics streams revealed in nine child health promoting measures (cases)

The policy stream <sup>a</sup> (the cases)	The problem and the politics streams	Quotes related to the problem and politics streams
Physical activity (Case 1)	Problems Politics	None declared <i>'In this municipality there is a strong interest in sports and culture, very strong among politicians and public officials'</i> (administration manager)
Growing-up conditions (Case 2)	Problems	<i>'We experienced that the kids mucked things up, things happened'</i> (politician). <i>'The economical crisis during the 90s resulted in a dismantling of both the social welfare administration and the school administration'</i> (administration manager)
	Politics	<i>'We had a political group for evaluation of all the schools' aims, each year they have to provide a quality rating . . . We discuss their results and their quality ratings, we consider what have to be acted on and improved, what have to be changed'</i> (politician)
Drug prevention (Case 3)	Problems	<i>'The fact that there existed a drug consumption was a concern in it self'</i> (administration manager). <i>'Many parents were worried'</i> (public official)
	Politics	<i>'The chairman of the municipal executive board carries the tradition that in reality has existed for very long in the municipality, that the questions about drugs are important questions'</i> (administration manager)
Language development (Case 4)	Problems	<i>'The language status in the municipality was in general very low and we experienced extraordinarily poor school results'</i> (administration manager). <i>'This community has a large number of immigrants with a big group from Turkey with the tradition that mothers work at home and have many children. These children hadn't good enough skills in the Swedish language when they started to go to school'</i> (politician)
	Politics	<i>' . . . the political decision to do something in the municipality was decisive. It was the public officials who raised the issue and the politicians who acted'</i> (project leader). <i>'Money from the government offered time for consideration'</i> (public official)
Traffic and playground safety (Case 5)	Problems	<i>'We found that in some places it was inappropriate for children to walk'</i> (politician). <i>'We expanded rapidly in the 1960s and now many schools are due for renovation, which created a convenient opportunity to improve the schools' play and traffic environment'</i> (city manager)
	Politics	<i>'Children's welfare is the most important. All boards have to prioritise children and adolescents'</i> (budget document). <i>'The political discussion was important from the beginning, our approach was that the children represent an important group'</i> (politician)
Youth influence (Case 6)	Problems	<i>'There was a need for adolescents from different parts of the municipality to meet; they needed some sort of forum'</i> (administration manager). <i>'One had surely known and seen that participation in elections had decreased'</i> (project leader)
	Politics	<i>'We had young politicians with a strong background in the socialistic youth party who needed to set up profiles'</i> (politician). <i>'The Youth Government worked hard during the middle of the 90s to encourage municipalities to actively work for the UN's children convention and for youth influence'</i> (project leader)

Continued

Table 3: Continued

The policy stream <sup>a</sup> (the cases)	The problem and the politics streams	Quotes related to the problem and politics streams
Children with special needs in school (e.g. with learning disabilities) (Case 7)	Problems	'The need of pupil assistants grew like an avalanche, unfortunately beyond the budget' (administration manager). 'The administration manager was concerned over the financial situation, the combination expensive but not particularly good is not fun' (psychologist)
	Politics	'In the turn of the year we had a big financial deficit and we were commissioned by the politicians to scrutinise this' (administration manager). 'It was a political decision' (administration manager). 'There was a need and governmental money appeared, otherwise it had been uncertain' (public official)
Crime prevention (Case 8)	Problems	'The most important triggering factor was the local police's statistics about an increasing criminality in the municipality' (project leader)
	Politics	'Then came proposals from the government and the Swedish parliament to start crime preventing boards in the municipalities. These quite strong signals became a support' (public official)
Youth influence (Case 9)	Problems	'Some young people demanded to get something and shouted high about a café' (project leader). 'The adolescents asked for something, a stage after the youth recreation centre' (public official). 'In a survey it was revealed that 71% of the students in year 9 never visited a youth recreation centre, and even less in the upper secondary school' (administration manager)
	Politics	'A political intention existed, the opinion of all politicians is that this is important' (public official)

<sup>a</sup>The policies are given from start as each case study describes a health promoting measure, i.e. a solution of a problem.

resource claim to a hearing was not present. The key resource sheer persistence is, however, represented. Only in case 9, no actors possessing the key resource sheer persistence was mentioned by the informants. Case 9 also differs from the other cases in that the problem stream constitutes more of demands than of explicit problems. However, the young people wanting a place to meet put their demand forward to the politicians as a local problem in a moment when a political intention to invest in young people was prevailing.

Several efforts to secure the validity and reliability of this study were made. To let city managers select municipal measures and to let the snow ball method choose informants and direct the number of interviews decreased the potential influence of the authors. The degree of trustworthiness, the validity measure in qualitative research (Patton, 2002; Graneheim and Lundman, 2004), is thus assessed as adequate. Furthermore, one likely unbiased additional informant in each municipality confirmed the information given by

the original interviewees and an acceptable coding agreement was demonstrated.

We do not know the long-term success of the measures described in the case studies, except in case 1 which has been ongoing since 1961. Thus, we cannot draw any conclusions about the value of tracing policy windows and policy entrepreneurs in order to predict successful policy development in the long term based on the results in this study.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study shows that the theoretical concepts policy windows and policy entrepreneurs were identifiable in the policy process of nine child health promoting measures in three Swedish municipalities. If policy makers could learn to predict the opening of policy windows, the planning of public health measures might be more straightforward. This also applies to policy makers' ability to detect actors possessing policy



**Table 4:** Policy entrepreneur resources in nine child health promoting cases

Cases	Policy entrepreneur resources		
	Person(s) attributed the policy entrepreneur resource 'claim to a hearing' <sup>a</sup>	Person(s) attributed the policy entrepreneur resource 'political connections or negotiating skills' <sup>b</sup>	Person(s) attributed the policy entrepreneur resource 'sheer persistence' <sup>c</sup> (Interviewees in brackets)
Case 1			NGO representatives 'All are enthusiasts, some of them invest vast amounts of time, vast amounts' (public representative). 'I do not think that with all grants in the world this would happen without these people and their tradition to work' (administration manager)
Case 2	Four politicians	Four administrative managers and one public official	A public official 'Some courage was necessary to tell those VIP's what they had to do, but I know that I am right' (public official). 'We had a base, but without her it had not mattered how many directives we had got' (administration manager)
Case 3	Two politicians	Three administrative managers and one public authority representative	An administrative manager and a public official 'Actually I am devoted to public issues, otherwise I shouldn't be working for the municipality' (administration manager). 'My opinion is that the survival of the idea depended on that we found a project leader who understood to develop and sell the idea' (administration manager)
Case 4	Three politicians	Two public officials	Several politicians and several public officials '... this has been important for the politicians, especially for the chairman of the educational committee' (preschool director), 'He (a community planner) was the architect behind' (project leader), 'He (the community planner) has been involved during all years, he has always been present' (preschool teacher)
Case 5	Two politicians	Two administration managers	A politician and an administration manager 'He has a firmly rooted conviction that children have their own rights and that it is self-evident to listen to them' (an external document). 'I have always had a passion for these questions, i.e. physical environment; it gives a satisfaction to use money for something that feels perfectly right' (politician)
Case 6	Several politicians	One public official	Several politicians 'I was burning for the issue, it was my bill' (politician). 'I was more positive than my political party, they didn't want it to cost anything' (politician)
Case 7		One administration manager and one public official	One administration manager 'I think I have a basic commitment in these questions. The more one learn about working with children and adolescents the more fascinated one becomes. To try to find new and better solutions motivates me; it is possible to find nourishment in that' (administration manager)

Continued

Table 4: Continued

Cases	Policy entrepreneur resources		
	Person(s) attributed the policy entrepreneur resource 'claim to a hearing' <sup>a</sup>	Person(s) attributed the policy entrepreneur resource 'political connections or negotiating skills' <sup>b</sup>	Person(s) attributed the policy entrepreneur resource 'sheer persistence' <sup>c</sup> (Interviewees in brackets)
Case 8	One politician	One public authority representative and one public official	One public authority representative and one public official 'The local police commissioner is probably the best person I have ever met and worked together with, he is definitely an advocate and has an impressive engagement' (public official). 'She has been extremely capable and very efficient and she has made many activities to get started' (city manager)
Case 9	Two politicians	One administrative manager and one public official	

<sup>a</sup>The actor has an ability to speak for others, hold a decision-making position or possesses expertise (politicians clearly present in the policy process).

<sup>b</sup>The actor holds a combination of technical expertise and political know-how (administration managers, public officials and public authority representatives clearly present in the policy process).

<sup>c</sup>The actor invest time and other resources to promote their solution (any actor clearly present in the policy process).

entrepreneur resources. A means to speed up the coupling of the three streams might be to have solutions 'stored' for occasions when the two other streams (the problem stream and the politics stream) are seemingly joining. The Swedish National Institute of Public Health has developed a child and adolescent health encyclopaedia which could serve as an example of such stored solutions (<http://www.fhi.se/en>).

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