

# **A System of Provision Approach to sense make the Interplay of Policies, Projects, and Consumption Behaviours to address Grand Challenges**

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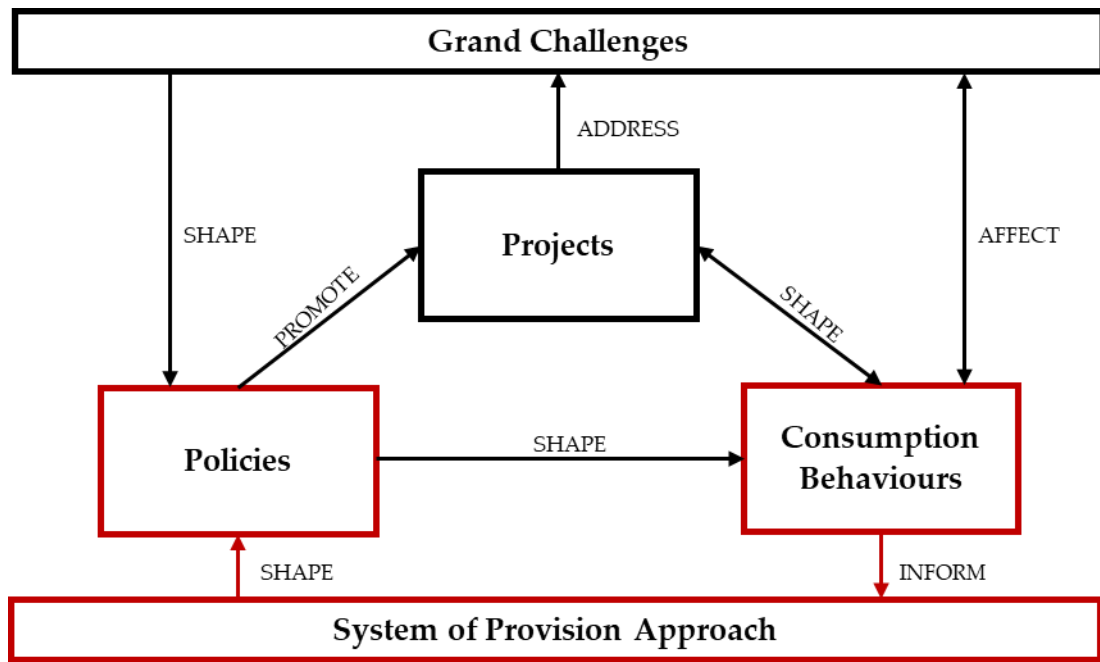
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## **Abstract**

Projects are the central element to bring together policies and consumption behaviours to address grand challenges. In this paper, we discuss how the SoP perspective can be an ideal theoretical framework to sensemake how policies promote projects, shaping consumption patterns which in turn affect grand challenges. There is growing literature regarding SoP, which is vastly ignored in project studies. This paper aims twofold: first, unveil how policymakers can leverage the System of Provision (SoP) approach in their decision-making processes to promote projects. Second, we present how projects can shape consumption behaviours and vice-versa.



## Introduction

The escalation of long-term phenomena like globalisation, depletion of natural resources, and an ageing population is becoming prominent in policy and academic debates. Adapting to this evolving reality requires that countries cannot depend on the status quo of “business as usual” (European Commission, 2013). Grand challenges refer to highly ambitious objectives that demand extensive resources, collaborations, and efforts to accomplish (Coenen et al., 2015). Grand challenges aim to tackle significant global concerns with wide-ranging societal, environmental, and technological impacts and can originate from a diverse range of fields such as science, technology, engineering, and social sciences.

Policymakers are placing (or should place) greater efforts on addressing grand challenges. This approach is being promoted especially by supranational entities such as the OECD and the European Union (EU) but is slowly being adopted by local and regional authorities as well (Coenen et al., 2015). Grand challenges require policy and decision-makers (e.g. governments and public institutions) to design and implement policies to address and mitigate their impact. Coming back to the figure presented in the abstract, there are three main elements that we are focusing on, and all of them have a twofold effect:

- *Policies.* First, policies can promote some types of projects while hindering others. For example, new restrictions on car emissions can lead to new R&D projects developed by automotive companies (e.g. Hybrid or electric cars). Second, policies can directly shape consumption behaviours. Using the previous example, restricting access to

certain areas of cities for some cars would incentivise consumers to change their behaviours, pushing them to acquire electric cars or to use public transportation.

- *Projects*. First, projects can directly address grand challenges. The development of cars with lower fuel consumption would directly reduce emissions. Second, projects can, similarly to policies, shape consumption behaviours. Electric cars, for example, could disincentivise people to use the car for long trips, making them prefer other transport solutions (e.g. trains).
- *Consumption behaviours*. First, consumption behaviours can directly affect grand challenges. For example, substituting gasoline cars with electric cars could positively contribute to fighting climate change. Second, consumption behaviours are shaped by projects and can also shape projects. For example, the mass adoption of electric cars would require a capillary infrastructure of electric chargers.

This paper aims twofold: first, unveil how policymakers can leverage the System of Provision (SoP) approach in their decision-making processes to promote projects. Second, we present how projects can shape consumption behaviours and vice-versa. To do so, it is necessary to investigate how to adapt the SoP to conduct a prospective analysis leveraging the empirical retrospective cases in the literature, particularly how SoP can be used to shape policies and properly evaluate the impact on consumption behaviours.

## Theoretical background: System of Provision

The SoP approach is a holistic and comprehensive framework linking policy interventions and consumption behaviours (Fine and Leopold, 1993). The SoP approach, in fact, is an approach for studying consumption. It is derived from a critical review of consumption theories from the 90s and evolved over the last three decades (Bayliss and Fine, 2020). The SoP approach emphasises the importance of understanding how different actors and factors interact to shape a system. It recognises that systems are complex, interconnected, and shaped by various economic, social, cultural, political, geographical, historical and technological factors (Bayliss and Fine, 2020; Mattioli et al., 2020). The SoP approach considers elements deriving from different disciplines (e.g. anthropology, psychology, sociology). It comprehends five main themes, identified as the main drivers to consumption: *Agents*, individuals or groups (structured or unstructured) of individuals that participate in the system; *Structures*, forms of provisioning of goods or services (e.g. institutional, social, organisational); *Processes*, the sequences of activities that take place both at a systemic level, within the SoP or around the SoP; *Relations*, connections between agents (e.g. social classes, ages, income levels); *Material Cultures*, the meaning that the agents assigned to a product or a service. The purpose of exploring SoPs through agencies, structures, processes, relations, and material cultures is twofold: firstly, to adopt a comprehensive perspective, and secondly, to enable targeted resolution of specific SoPs within their appropriate context. In doing so, the SoP approach not only considers the single elements of the systems but also identifies and capture the value of complementarities. Complementarities, in fact, are constructive interplays between two or more elements inter- or intra-systems, where their

combination generates greater value than the sum of their individual values in isolation (Markard and Hoffmann, 2016).

The SoP offers policy and decision-makers a framework for linking end users with the relations and agents involved in the provisioning chain, which are typically concealed from view (Bayliss and Fine, 2020). The SoP allows uncovering and making explicit aspects of the systems that would remain otherwise obscure and not considered. For this reason, SoP can represent a new, evolved, and versatile framework for the assessment of the direct and indirect impact that strategic decisions from policymakers, such as promoting or not a certain project or class of projects, can generate at the social, economic, political, and environmental level. The SoP can explore the relationship, often mediated through projects, between macro and micro perspectives acting as a bridge between macro-level policies (e.g. financing and provisioning systems) and the micro-level actions of individual producers and consumers (Bayliss and Fine, 2020). Therefore, it could be useful for policymakers to take strategic decisions such as allocating funds for particular sectors or infrastructures, imposing regulations or privatising some sectors (Bayliss, 2017).

SoP is a framework that can provide valuable support to the quest of project scholars looking to understand the link between policies, projects and consumers. This quest might be explicitly aimed toward the SoP (Mattioli, 2020), while more often than not, the underpinning need of the research can be satisfied by the SoP. The SoP represents the ideal framework for understanding policies and projects' impact on a specific category of stakeholders: end-users/consumers. Scholars outside project studies have already adopted the SoP to explain different contexts from a sectorial (e.g. Water, Food, Waste), geographical

(e.g. UK, USA, Vietnam) and temporal point of view (Bayliss, 2017; Fine and Davidson, 2018; Hansen, 2018, 2017; Lee, 2018; Schelly, 2014). Nonetheless, adopting the SoP results is limited, and all the benefits that could create are not fully exploited. For example, all the previous studies retrospectively adopted the SoP, trying to properly answer the “big question” presented by (Bayliss and Fine, 2020, p. 5), “*who has what, how and why*”, which is extraordinarily close to the very recent discussions around new stakeholder theory (McGahan, 2021). Despite the undeniable importance of understanding the impacts of previous policies and major changes in specific sectors, the major contribution of the SoP can be originated by adopting the lesson learned in retrospective case studies to improve and better orient upcoming decisions in a prospective way. For instance, in project studies, SoP can be used to investigate the relationship between infrastructure projects and the end-users of such infrastructure. In particular, SoP could clarify how the provision of infrastructure shapes end-users behaviour and vice versa.

## Method

In order to investigate how SoP can contribute to policy and decision-makers in shaping and supporting their decisions, this paper presents a narrative review of the literature. When reviewing a topic that spans various disciplines, using a narrative approach can be fitting as it does not have predetermined selection criteria. Moreover, this approach can effectively develop theory (Fan et al., 2022). Narrative reviews have the potential to transcend disciplinary boundaries, transfer theoretical concepts across domains, and unify

divergent fields of research (Breslin and Gatrell, 2020). By doing so, a narrative review can be directed by a theory-building process during the literature search, which could evolve alongside the emergence of new theories. However, similarly to (Langer, 2022, p. 4), *“Despite its narrative character, this literature review proceeds systematically in terms of sampling and evaluating the literature”*. This narrative literature review, in fact, comprehends two sequential steps in search of the literature: a systematic search and a snowballing search.

The review started with a systematic search on Scopus. In Scopus, using Boolean operators, we searched for all documents containing in title, abstract, or keywords “System\* of Provision\*” OR “SoP approach\*”. This search led to 215 documents, including 160 articles, 21 book chapters, 14 conference papers, 12 reviews, 5 books, 2 short surveys and 1 editorial. Due to the manageable number of documents, we decided to include all of them in the starting sample. In the filtering phase of the sample, we applied the following inclusion and exclusion criteria to the title, abstract and keywords of the documents:

- Inclusion criteria: the document discusses the SoP as a framework for studying consumption.
- Exclusion criteria: the document mentions the SoP with a limited focus on adopting the framework.

From the filtering phase, 100 documents were excluded (46%). We are scrutinising the full text of the remaining 115 documents. Applying the same inclusion and exclusion criteria of the previous step, we excluded 9 out of the 30 documents already analysed (30%).

Simultaneously with the full-text reading, we started complimenting the systematic search with an iterative snowballing approach. Currently, 6 additional documents were included in the sample, within which 2 books.

#### Expected finding

State of the art how SoP has already been linked to Projects, Programme and Portfolios

#### Expected discussions

Discuss how SoP can move forward salient discussions in project studies, particularly

- How projects create future (and why)
- The link between projects and policy
- The link between projects and grand challenges
- The link between projects and consumers' (users) behaviours

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