

From Law to Lived Enactment: The New Social Services Act and Design Practice as Transformative Policy

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Transformative policy, such as the new Social Services Act, is often mistakenly understood as a linear process that moves from political decision to implementation. The Design and Policy in Practice (DoPP) project addresses the challenge of understanding and practicing policy development as systemic learning within the conditions of “messy realpolitik.”

The study examines the transformation of social services by following design work within the TITI project (Early Insights for Early Interventions), analyzing power relations within actor networks, and reviewing discourses in legislative and policy texts. Taken together, these analyses illuminate how the future of social work is not merely regulated but also actively formed and shaped through different design practices.

The findings show that the policy process is deeply performative, i.e., what actors say and do during periods of transition actively shapes what social services become. The analysis of actor networks demonstrates how the mobilization of politically influential actors alongside independent organizations produces a stabilizing consensus that protects transformation processes from short-term political fluctuations. At the same time, the review of policy texts reveals that central concepts—such as prevention and sustainability—often function through self-reference, creating interpretive gaps that must be filled through local practice.

The study contributes new insight by showing that design work during policy transitions is not a linear response to political decisions, but an improvisational and performative practice that is itself part of policymaking. Design processes and work actively give meaning and action to vaguely defined concepts like prevention and sustainability. Design artifacts emerge not merely as pedagogical or communicative tools, but as active instruments that shape how legislation is interpreted, translated, and embodied in everyday practice. Through the use of such artifacts, municipalities were able to prioritize societal needs over organizational silos—a process that constitutes policy development in its own right. In this way, design practice shifted attention from what the law says to what the law makes possible. As such, design processes need to be understood as part of wider actor networks and assemblages of political interest and administrative conditions.



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This is critical for the understanding of transformative policy because systemic change requires more than just new paragraphs. It requires a renegotiation of social and institutional relations. Design offers the tools needed to navigate “messy realpolitik” and handle the tensions that arise when high ambitions meet restrictive frameworks. This perspective is essential to ensure that social sustainability remains a value-driven societal transformation. Without design as a knowledge-intensive practice, and without organizational design capability and capacity, transformative policy risks remaining rhetoric or being reduced to technical and administrative streamlining.

THE ROAD FORWARD FOR POLICY

- Invest in design capability and capacity across all levels of policymaking, appreciating design as a knowledge-intensive practice rather than a one-size-fits-all process.
- Encourage systematic experimentation that enables local and national learning processes, where policy is deliberately shaped through practice.
- Treat policymaking as co-creation, acknowledging that there is no clear-cut “implementation” phase; rather, policy is continuously performed and always becoming.
- Recognize transformative policy as part of a broader societal project, in which democratic values must serve as guiding north stars.

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KEY POINTS FOR POLICY

- Transformative policy requires design capability and capacity to navigate competing and conflicting priorities amongst multiple actors. Deliberate shaping and forming through practice bring policy into being, making it more responsive to residents' needs.
- Generative artifacts, often created through design practice, make transformation negotiable and reduce abstraction by prompting actors to imagine concrete alternatives for future practice within the framework of new policy.
- Policy is a continuous process of becoming. Transformation is ongoing and occurs both before and after a law or regulation is formally adopted.
- Democratic values must be safeguarded, so that transformative policy does not become a vehicle for reducing societal goals to administrative efficiency or economic optimization.
- Collaborative networks foster meaningful space for interpretation and action, thereby enabling local co-creation and experimentation that support deeper system transformation rather than detailed or restrictive central control.

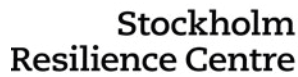
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