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Heijden, M. van der; Kuipers, S.L.

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Article

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Overlooking the obvious? Understanding patterns of policy inaction in organizational decision-making

Machiel van der Heijden[1,*], Sanneke Kuipers[2]

[1]Utrecht University School of Governance (USG), Utrecht University, Bijlhouwerstraat 6, Utrecht, 3511 ZC, Netherlands
[2]Institute of Security and Global Affairs (ISGA), Leiden University, Turfmarkt 99, The Hague, 2511 DP, Netherlands
*Corresponding author: m.j.a.vanderheijden@uu.nl

Abstract

This article theorizes on how patterns of policy inaction emerge, where policymakers systematically fail to address pressing societal issues or signals about failing policies. Building on Herbert Simon's core concept of decision premises, we argue how such patterns of inaction result from the systematic biases and blind spots inherent in the organizational design and institutional context of ministerial departments and public agencies. By explicitly specifying the microfoundations underlying policy inaction, we build a theoretical model that provides a mechanistic explanation of how entrenched policy goals and rigid organizational structures can impede policy action. This model is illustrated through two specific cases: the childcare benefits scandal involving the Dutch tax authority and the mining-induced earthquakes in the province of Groningen. A discussion of these cases leads to several theoretical propositions on how patterns of policy inaction are created. We highlight the internalization of formalized policy objectives, the cognitive biases induced by horizontal specialization, the dampening effect of vertical hierarchy, and responsibility avoidance due to rigid role divisions as the primary mechanisms through which decision premises link institutional structures to patterns of policy inaction.

Key words policy inaction, decision premises, organizational structure, information processing, bureaucracy

Introduction

Governments frequently miss problematic information signals, leading to protracted policy failures. Although government bureaucracies are designed to be efficient information-processing structures, these structures often contain inherent biases and blind spots (Bach and Wegrich 2019). As a result, critical signals are often disregarded in policymaking or fail to ascend to the upper echelons of the organizational hierarchy. This can create patterns of policy inaction, where governments fail to act or essentially "do nothing" about mounting societal problems or lurking crises (McConnell and 't Hart 2019). This article tackles the question of how such patterns of policy inaction occur and what role the organizational design and institutional context of ministerial departments and public agencies play therein.

In recent years, the Dutch government faced two major scandals with similar long incubation periods. In the *childcare benefits scandal* involving the Dutch tax authority, problematic fraud detection practices had long been noted by lower-level officials but were not acted upon by top-level decision makers, allowing the practice of unjustly reclaiming thousands of euros in benefits from financially vulnerable families to persist (National Ombudsman 2017). In the public outrage surrounding *mining-induced earthquakes* in the province of Groningen, the severe implications of gas extraction had already been determined by various experts, but top-level decision-makers only felt the urgency to act after significant damage had been done (Dutch Safety Board [DSB] 2015). In both cases, important policy signals failed to permeate the highest levels of the ministerial hierarchy, leading to severe wrongdoings against many Dutch citizens. The parliamentary inquiries that followed created an enormous societal and political backlash, as the widespread perception of preventable failure severely damaged governmental trust (Kanne and Driessen 2021) and forced several ministers to resign.

What leads to this kind of massive failure? This article analyzes and theorizes these cases as instances of *policy inaction* (McConnell and 't Hart 2019, 648)—defined as "an instance and/or pattern of non-intervention by individual policymakers, public organizations, governments or policy networks in relation to an issue within and potentially within their jurisdiction and where other plausible potential policy interventions did not take place." An increasing number of scholars theorize on the various types of inaction to which policymakers and bureaucratic organizations might fall prey (Bach and Wegrich 2019; Feduzi, Runde, and Schwarz 2022). This inaction can either be about policymakers failing to address (new and/or persistent) societal problems or policymakers' inaction to resolve ongoing failures of existing policies (Brown and Stark 2022). Our focus is the latter, where policymakers fail to intervene even when their policies actively create societal problems and harm citizens.

Policy inaction does not always imply "doing nothing." As McConnell and 't Hart (2019, 648) argue, inaction constitutes a pattern of "not-intervening: not committing resources, not proposing bills, not authorizing or undertaking executive actions whereas intervention could have been undertaken." We characterize the unresponsiveness in our cases as inaction because the responsible authorities' actions sustained the status quo and allowed existing policies to run their detrimental course, despite repeated alarming signals and clear possibilities for intervention. Such sustained inaction can have severe consequences, ranging from missing information signals that culminate in full-scale disasters (Heimann 1993) to major policy crises, such as the *Robodebt scheme* in Australia (see Moynihan et al. 2025). Adequately understanding the mechanisms by which policymakers sustain patterns of policy inaction is thus essential.

Our theoretical argument maintains that patterns of inaction result from the systematic biases and blind spots inherent to the organizational design and institutional context of ministerial departments and public agencies (see Bach and Wegrich 2019; Van der Heijden 2024). Public scandals in which such policy inaction or non-intervention plays a role often result in a "whodunnit" of accountability and blame. Although such a focus on individual culpability is arguably justified from a political perspective, it potentially obfuscates how patterns of non-intervention occur *inadvertently*. These patterns are often the result of institutional pressures to which public officials must adhere. In analyzing policy failures, Romzek and Dubnick (1987) show how specific accountability systems create an overreliance on hierarchical and legal accountability mechanisms and can distract an organization from other critical signals. Such systems create the "cognitive and structural straightjackets" (Brown and Stark 2022, 48) that define which information is deemed relevant and which is filtered out. However, what do such cognitive and structural straightjackets look like and how do they affect policymakers' actions, interactions, and eventual (non-)decisions? The main question guiding the present article is how macro-level institutional structures and bureaucratic behavior produce the patterns of policy inaction to which policymakers individually and collectively fall prey?

The core theoretical contribution of this article is the development of a more concrete, mechanistic explanation for policy inaction that moves beyond existing macro-level accounts. We shift the explanatory focus from political intentionality (e.g., deliberate choice or blame avoidance) and the inherent complexity of problems (e.g., wicked problems) to the inadvertent effects of institutional structure and organizational design. To achieve this, we draw on Herbert Simon's classic concept of decision premises (Simon 1947), which refer to the unquestioned assumptions encoded into the hierarchical positions, roles, and goals of an organization, strongly guiding the behaviors of individual officials. In fact, organizational structures are solidified political agendas that guide information processing, organizational attention, and decision-making (Hammond 1986; Kuipers, Yesilkagit, and Carroll 2021). The information pathways that such structures create filter which policy signals are deemed important (enough) and are eventually acted upon by decision-makers.

By operationalizing institutionalized decision premises, we detail the process by which past political choices become structurally encoded into roles and goals, systematically generating cognitive straightjackets for organizational decisionmakers. Although institutional inertia and status quo bias in governmental bureaucracies are well-known tendencies, we show how such patterns are underpinned by the specific filtering of information signals at the organizational and individual levels. We move the analysis from merely observing bias to providing a mechanistic explanation for how inaction can become the path of least resistance for decision-makers, even when existing policies harm citizens. By integrating the concept of decision premises into studies of policy inaction, we unveil the specific mechanisms through which institutional structures produce patterns of policy inaction. We thereby respond to McConnell and 't Hart's (2019) call to study policy inaction historically and comparatively but also to show how inaction has both individual, organizational and institutional drivers, what that looks like empirically, and how these levels interact.

Such an effort has both theoretical and practical relevance. Theoretically, it allows us to move beyond the macro-level theories that relate institutional structures to policy inaction as process and outcome. Fleshing out the lower level (i.e., individual, organizational) mechanisms by which such effects are produced clarifies how this argument would work on the ground, as well as its potential limitations (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010). Practically, such a mechanistic explanation helps us better specify how structures can be changed to overcome issues of information-processing and ultimately policy inaction. Understanding how structures affect individual information-processing allows us to pinpoint particular issues or diagnose informational bottlenecks. Identifying the constraints of organizational structure enables organizational decision-makers to anticipate potential unintended consequences of departmental restructurings, as well as the inherent trade-offs involved (Van der Heijden 2024).

Theoretical framework

McConnell and 't Hart (2019, 648) emphasize the need for more research on policy *inactivity*, when policymakers do not address pressing societal issues or failing policies. Limitations in attention and resources requires policymakers to select the issues most relevant to them from a range of possible actions and marginalize or exclude others. As a result, governmental policymaking is rife with patterns of *policy inaction*, in which policymakers do not intervene in relation to an issue, despite it being in their jurisdiction to do so, even with plausible alternatives available. It is important to discern between instances of inaction to produce adequate policy solutions or interventions for a societal problem (*child obesity*), and inaction to address a problem with an existing policy that produces harmful consequences to individual citizens or society at large (*reclaim of childcare benefits*). In that sense, each policy has elements of action and inaction. It is not necessarily that policymakers *do nothing*; it is also about not-intervening in existing policy actions, even in the face of signals of policy failure. We consider the continuation of harmful policies to be a form of policy inaction worthy of study—the failure to stop, adjust, or commit resources despite increasing signals of risk or harm.

Notably, policy inaction encompasses a range of types, particularly in relation to its motives (McConnell and 't Hart 2019, 651–2). Of course, inaction can be *intentional* in which policymakers make a strategic decision not to act because of ideological reasons or to first see how an issue plays out. Moreover, inaction can also be *imposed* in which external political constraints prevent action or inaction is reluctantly accepted due to a lack of expertise or resources. Importantly, however, policy inaction involves often more unintentional or *inadvertent* aspects. For instance, policymakers may be aware of an issue but not consider it important enough to warrant attention. In addition, policymakers may not even see an issue or register it as a problem, either because it is entirely new or it falls outside of the scope of existing beliefs and assumptions. In practice, these different inaction types are hard to distinguish. If a policy issue is deliberately ignored, this is clearly purposeful. However, the purposive non-intervention is often prompted by biased information processing or the imperfect heuristics of boundedly rational decision makers. The resulting policy consequences may then clearly be inadvertent or unintentional. Although the type of policy inaction also suggests a motive and associated explanation, the conceptual ambiguity between deliberate and inadvertent policy inaction warrants further investigation.

Various scholars have pointed to the role organizational or institutional factors to explain coordination problems and biased attention (Bach and Wegrich 2019; Feduzi, Runde, and Schwarz 2022). In fact, both policy action and policy inaction result from an institutional context that (re)produces both a biased focus and directs policymakers away from issues not deemed worthy of attention (McConnell and 't Hart 2019, 650). In the face of complex information and mixed policy signals, institutional structures help decision-makers focus on a more limited and manageable set of issues and achieve their goals despite multiple constraints (Bach and Wegrich 2019). Problems arise when those issues that fall off the radar and may later turn out to be critical for policy responsiveness.

Still, the mechanisms by which institutional structures create biases are underspecified. We need more research to understand how organizational and institutional structures affect the individual officials that populate these structures and how their individual actions and interactions create collective patterns of inaction. Understanding policy inaction therefore requires a shift from macro-level associations to a mechanism-based approach, focusing on the *microfoundations* of individual action of involved policy actors (Jilke et al. 2019). Our framework leverages the concept of decision premises to provide such an explanation, providing a meso-level bridge connecting the macro-institutional level to the individual level of action and interaction. Decision premises serve as the structurally encoded cognitive filters that govern informational processing and (mis-)classification of whether policy signals warrant attention or require intervention. The mechanisms outlined below, corresponding with McConnell and 't Hart's (2019) identification of drivers of inaction at different levels of analysis, help us understand how individual behavior connects to its institutional context in producing inaction.

Analytical sociology and mechanistic explanations

To work out the mechanisms underpinning policy inaction, we base our model on the principles of *analytical sociology* (Hedström and Ylikoski 2010), distinguishing between different kinds of mechanisms by which social phenomena can be brought back to their *microfoundations*. Although the focus is still on the potential relationship between macro-level properties—in this case institutional structures and patterns of policy inaction—deeper explanatory understanding requires the identification of causal mechanisms generating such macro-level associations. Different kinds of mechanisms exist to describe these macro-micro and micro-macro links. First, *situational mechanisms* shape the context in which individual actors operate—the social structures that constrain an individual's action and influence their desires and beliefs. Second, *action formation* mechanisms describe the way in which individual actors will likely respond to these social structures (i.e., a theory of action). Third, *transformational mechanisms* explain how individual actions aggregate to produce social outcomes. Together these mechanisms can be visualized as a bathtub-model often linked to the work of James Coleman (1986, see Fig. 1).

Below, we specify this model for the context of ministerial departments and information processing. Our research question pertains to the macro-level link between institutional structure and patterns of policy inaction. To establish this link, we need to see how Herbert Simon's (1947) decision premises are institutionalized (situational mechanisms) to understand how institutions and individual actions are linked (action formation mechanisms) and collectively produce patterns of policy inaction (transformational mechanisms).

Decision premises and situational mechanisms

We argue that *decision premises* can link the institutional context to individual action and explain how inadvertent and sometimes

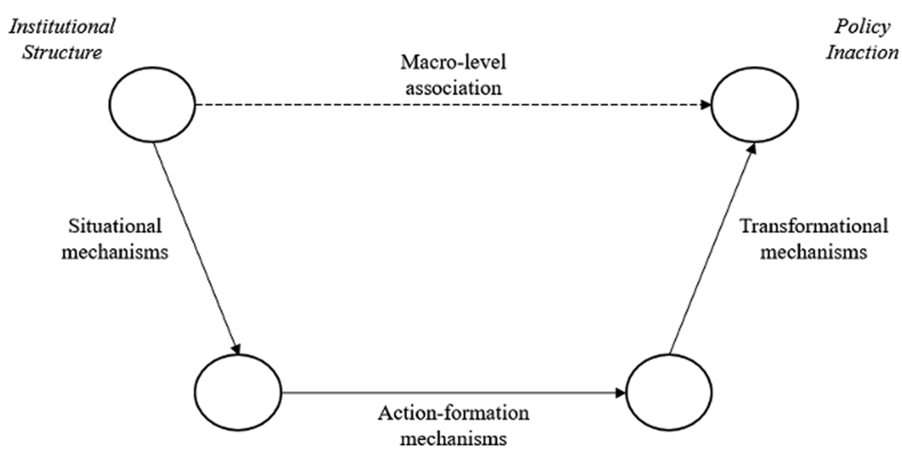

Figure 1. Visualization of mechanistic explanation.

purposive policy inaction occurs. Decision premises are basically "the givens" with which decisions are made (Simon 1947). Although any course of decision-making includes a variety of inputs to consider, some considerations are taken as self-evident and not questioned at all. Decision premises are the structural preconditions that define a decision-making situation, helping boundedly rational actors to deal with complexity and information overload. Importantly, decision premises are thus not merely *internal* cognitive states of individual actors. Rather, they are embedded within institutional structures, effectively defining the decision-making situation of individuals. Within an organization, decision premises are constitutive of the *situational mechanisms* that shape the context within which individual actors operate (*macro-to-micro*). More specifically, we argue that decision-premises translate institutional structures into decision-making situations in three different ways. In that sense, decision premises function as a meso-level mediator that connect macro-level institutional structures to micro-levels actions and interactions.

First, Kühl (2024) describes *goal programming* as the targets to be achieved in organizations, such as the political objectives, formal policy goals, or specific work instructions that determine which actions are to be viewed as "right" or "wrong" by organizational actors. The organization and its officials focus on a set of issues that appear important and screen out everything else (Joseph and Gaba 2020; see also Boin and Lodge 2021). This prioritization is provided by overarching organizational or policy goals. Of course, emphasizing one goal always comes at the cost of attention to other goals and factors. Goals provide organizations with "blinders" that channel attention (Luhmann 1995). For ministerial departments, these goals are provided by political priorities formalized in coalition agreements and in formal laws, performance targets, and work instructions that translate these priorities to the operational level.

Second, formal goals are often *hardwired into the structural design of organizations* (Boin et al. 2010; Kuipers, Yesilkagit, and Carroll 2021). For ministries, such hardwiring manifests itself through name changes, the (re)structuring of departments creating separate functions, and the formal roles of public officials. Such structures delineate the responsibilities of different parts of the organization, the individuals working for these units, and the particular forms of expertise on which they draw. Information is thus perceived from a specific position within the organization, provided by a particular role in a specialized team or unit. Several studies on organizational structure and innovation show how vertical structures can both enable and constrain the cognitive adaptability of organizational officials and thereby define the direction and breadth by which they search for solutions (Gavetti 2005; Jansen et al. 2006; Keum and See 2017; Reitzig and Maciejovsky 2015).

Third, this structure of the organization and the specific roles and responsibilities in the teams, units, or departments *creates the main communication and accountability lines* between different parts of government (both within and between organizations). Particularly hierarchically structured ministerial departments channel attention when information travels up the ranks. Bureaucratic accountability systems compel public officials to prioritize the concerns of their superiors, who exercise significant control over subordinate interactions (Romzek and Dubnick 1987, 228). Those at the top take on responsibility for decisions made and actions taken, removing the burden of subordinates who know to whom they may and may not speak up in this structure. To facilitate decision making, organizational structure deliberately restricts opportunities for communication and limits the participation of actors or stakeholders in decision-making. Delineating responsibilities in a hierarchy precludes the necessity to constantly verify the correctness or usefulness of information received by others (Csaszar 2012). The formalized communication channels within an organization establish the proper routing of information, legitimate points of contact, and particular domains of responsibility. Policy information received from subordinate levels forms an important premise and input for subsequent actions and decisions.

In that sense, within an organizational context, decision premises are incorporated in the formal goals, bureaucratic structure, hierarchical positions, and communication and accountability lines that make up a ministerial department or public agency (Christensen 1991, 305). For example, being a junior analyst in a unit on *labor market policy* already prescribes to individual civil servants on what they should be working, give attention to, and when to inform their superiors. The question they ask when confronted with an external policy signal will be: "what will it do for employment opportunities?" Their formal role description provides them with a filter on what policy signals are important and when they need to intervene. The same can be said for the performance targets and annual plans of their unit or the broader goals prescribed by political supervisors. They provide organizational actors with a set of givens that are rarely questioned and help direct attention in the face of complexity. Table 1 summarizes the different sources of decision premises, including a definition and its potential manifestations.

Table 1. Sources of decision premise and examples.

Source of premise	Definition	Found in
Formalized goals	The targets and objectives to be achieved by organizations, formulated both externally and internally	Laws, ministerial decrees, coalition agreements, motions, organizational objectives, performance targets, work instructions
Organizational structures	Ways in which individual officials are grouped together in the units and divisions that make up organizations	Naming of ministries, units, teams, departments, task divisions, role descriptions
Accountability lines	The formal communication lines that connect different (parts of the) organization(s), both vertically and horizontally	Division of labor, formal responsibilities, formal communication channels

Action-formation mechanisms and bounded rationality

The bounded rationality of public officials provides the *action-formation* mechanism underlying our model (March and Simon 1958). Individual policy officials typically operate in a highly complex information environment. Although we assume them to be adaptive and goal-oriented decision-makers, they are inevitably subjected to individual and contextual limitations (Jones 2003). Rather than optimizing, people "satisfice," seeking out solutions that are good enough given limited time, available information, and cognitive restrictions (Bendor 2010). In the face of complexity, individuals can only make decisions by simplifying problems and focusing on a restricted number of aspects.

Herein lies the importance of considering institutional structures and the decision premises they create. Individual decision-makers work from a "problem space," describing the mental arena where decisions are made (Newell and Simon 1972). Although objective problem spaces might exist, the decision makers trying to solve a problem need heuristics and search strategies to navigate these spaces. This is what organizational structures do: By providing individual officials with a particular role or position, organizations delimit their officials' responsibilities and attentional capacities to focus on a single domain or aspect of the task environment (see Fredrickson 1986, 281). This establishes a "zone of acceptance" (Simon 1947), which defines the range of facts, policy options, and outcomes the official or department considers legitimate, relevant, and upon which they can act.

Importantly, structures decompose complex problems into many subproblems tackled by individual (or groups of) officials, allowing them to focus on a limited number of aspects (March and Simon 1958, 193). However, such decomposition necessarily creates selective perceptions for individual officials, thereby biasing their search for information (Cyert and March 1963). Public officials will primarily focus on information that is salient to the interests of their (sub)unit and communicate what they perceive as important. Crucially, information signals that fall outside the department's zone of acceptance—perhaps contradicting its primary goal (e.g., maximizing revenue or reducing fraud)—are automatically downgraded, filtered, or disregarded, making non-intervention the rational organizational response. In that sense, organizational structure has mixed effects on information-processing. On the one hand, it compensates for the bounded rationality of individual decision-makers, helping them to focus on the relevant aspects of the task environment rather than being overwhelmed by its complexity. On the other, it biases the information processing of boundedly rational decision-makers toward particular goals, roles, and forms of expertise. Understanding how these individual-level biases aggregate to collective patterns of policy inaction, however, requires further elaboration of the *transformational mechanisms* at play.

Transformational mechanisms and informational aggregation

It is important to recognize that patterns of policy inaction are not the result of the biased attention of *single* decision-makers. Policy inaction is essentially a *group process*, in which the actions and interactions of many individual decision-makers eventually result in collective inaction. To see how this works, *transformational mechanisms* help us understand how individual actions produce social patterns within a ministerial or organizational context. Several lines of theorizing provide us with mechanisms of aggregation that lead biased individual information-processing to collective patterns of inaction.

First, the selective information processing and potential biases that decision premises create can be amplified by pervasive group dynamics such as socialization or pressure to conform. The organization teaches new employees its shared basic assumptions to make sense of the world around them, so they learn what works and what does not (Boin and Christensen 2008; Scott 2008). The decomposition of ministerial departments into specialized departments, teams, and units also means that individual officials are potentially less often confronted with dissenting opinions or perspectives, creating the illusion of unanimity. In fact, they are likely to operate in a social and information environment that reinforces their beliefs and perspectives. Given that outcomes influence subsequent behavior and attitudes, such socialization processes have strong feedback effects, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. Policy inaction thus reinforces itself, as a lack of intervention is subsequently interpreted as a validation of existing beliefs and ways of working.

Second, beyond group dynamics and the cycles of policy inaction they potentially create in decomposed and specialized ministerial contexts, such feedback loops can also become *institutionalized* (Boin and Christensen 2008; Pierson 2000). Bureaucratic routines, such as formal reporting procedures, may prioritize particular types of information. Moreover, resources may be allocated to information sources and analyses that reinforce existing ideas and perceptions. Such processes of path dependency institutionalize existing biases, increasingly constraining future choices and closing options for dissent. As a result, an inevitable status quo bias emerges in policymaking, making it harder to challenge existing beliefs or ideas, even when confronted with contradictory information or evidence. Policy inaction is perpetuated as ministerial departments are increasingly structured in ways that ignore, buffer, or downplay information that could trigger change or instigate action.

Together this leads to a further specified model linking institutional structure and patterns of policy inaction through various mechanisms, including feedback dynamics (see Fig. 2). The concept of decision premises helps us understand the procedural rationality of decisions from the perspective of individual officials embedded in an institutional context or organizational structure (Dowding and Taflaga 2022). Decision premises connect the different drivers of inaction identified by McConnell and 't Hart (2019), linking macro-level constraints to micro-level cognitive processes and behaviors. Generally, the "preprocessed" information ending up at the top is distorted by the narrowly bounded structural positions that public officials occupy within a broader organizational architecture. Given the dynamics of socialization and path dependency this can lead to situations in which problematic signals or crucial pieces of information never reach high-level decision-makers (Csaszar 2012; Jacobides 2007), because they are unjustly discarded along the way. Combined with issues of blame avoidance and strategies of self-preservation inherent to bureaucratic politics (Hood 2011), the nature of

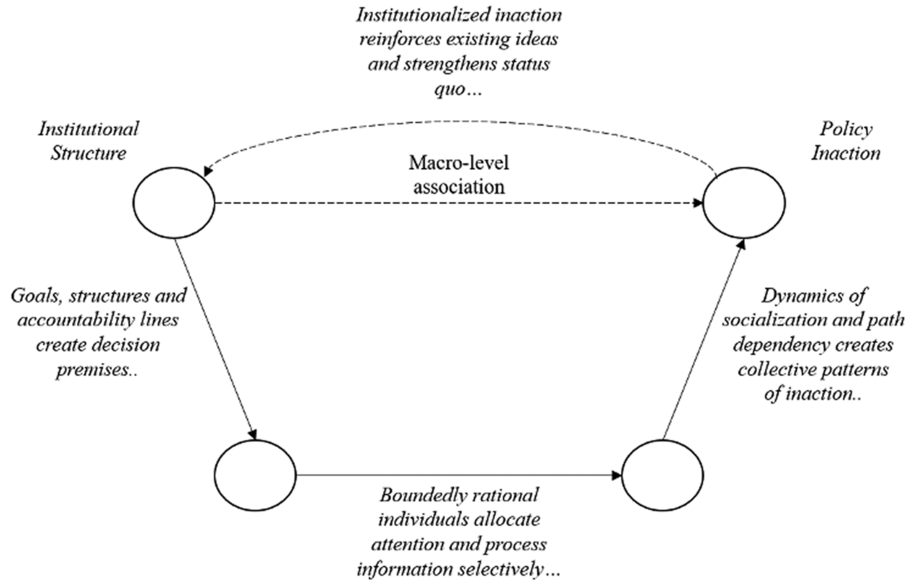

Figure 2. Worked-out model linking institutional structure to policy inaction.

ministerial departments makes such organizations overly vulnerable to producing patterns of policy inaction, particularly when multiple departments and agencies are involved (see Scharpf 1997, on non-coordination). Our subsequent analysis demonstrates the presented model and illustrates how patterns of inaction unfold.

Data and methods

We use in-depth qualitative material to illustrate the argument above and eventually develop it further. We aim at *theory elaboration* by using preexisting conceptual ideas (e.g., decision premises, policy inaction) as a basis for developing new theoretical insights (Fisher and Aguinis 2017). Although the general argument that institutional structures can create blind spots has been posited before (Bach and Wegrich 2019; McConnel and 't Hart 2019), the mechanisms by which this effect takes place are less understood. The concept of decision premises allows us to uncover these mechanisms and move theory forward.

We compare two different cases of policy inaction in the Netherlands: The *Childcare Benefits Scandal* and the *Groningen Earthquakes*. This allows for an in-depth examination of the proposed mechanisms and for further developing the causal pathways at play (George and Bennett 2005). Our approach prioritizes theory building and refinement over establishing generalizable causal inferences, making concerns about selecting on the dependent variable less of an issue (i.e., we choose cases in which the phenomenon of interest is likely to be "transparently observable") (Eisenhardt 1989). For both cases, we provide a "comprehensive storyline" in which we identify potentially relevant causal conditions in narrative style (Blatter and Haverland 2012, 110; Crasnow 2017). This serves to reconstruct the major sequences of the overall process by which the cases unfolded and to identify critical moments that shaped or reinforced patterns of policy inaction. For each of these "critical moments" of inaction, we assess the role decision premises played in the decision-making of involved actors.

The empirical material is based on formal documents, such as laws, explanatory memoranda, coalitions agreements, ministerial decrees, investigation reports, and policy memos. Moreover, we draw heavily on the transcripts of hearings held for the parliamentary inquiries in both cases. We primarily selected hearings from "insiders" to reconstruct the information processing and decision dynamics at critical moments. For the Groningen Earthquakes, we selected 23 hearings (held between September and October 2022); for the *Childcare Benefits Scandal*, we selected 35 hearings (held between November 2020 and September 2023). An inquiry is the most powerful instrument the Dutch parliament has at its disposal to scrutinize the work of the Government. During these inquiries, witnesses are questioned under oath. These witnesses range from experts and affected citizens to the (junior-)ministers and (top) civil servants involved in decision-making.

The inquiry interviews are fully transcribed and publicly accessible, providing an invaluable *inside*-view of the dynamics of decision-making surrounding non-intervention. We selected passages from the inquiries, focusing primarily on the considerations given by respondents for making particular choices. These passages were categorized in terms of (1) *goal programming* ("the law says…"), (2) *organizational structures* (the presence of organizational structures and related responsibilities), and (3) accountability lines ("we are only executing."). We used *Atlas.ti* to organize our observations and reconstruct the networks of actors and stakeholders, the timeline of events, and the arguments used in decision-making. This helped us reconstruct the patterns of inaction that characterize both cases and assess the analytical leverage of our theoretical argument.

Analysis

While vastly different cases in terms of topic and theme, the *Groningen earthquakes* and the *childcare benefits* cases both revolve around the failures of policymakers to act on problematic signals that the present policy was increasingly harmful to large groups of citizens. In the Groningen Gas Extraction case (1963–2018), signals and evidence on the relationship between gas drillings and earthquakes and its damaging consequences were systematically ignored, downplayed, and questioned. In the Childcare Benefits Scandal (2005–2019), information on the harsh implications of the fraud detection and reclaiming procedure by the Dutch Tax Authority was treated in a similar way. Both cases have clear patterns of inaction, in which involved policymakers did not intervene in existing policies, despite increasing risks and harmful consequences to citizens and several opportunities to do so. Below, we zoom in on three key moments in which such signals surfaced, and policymakers could have made a different choice. Subsequently, we argue that existing decision premises captured in goals, structures, and communication channels resulted in the observed pattern of inaction.

Groningen gas extraction

The Parliamentary Inquiry Committee on Gas Extraction in Groningen began all hearings in 2022 with the observation that "60 years of gas extraction in Groningen has greatly benefitted Dutch society" (Inquiry Committee [IC] 2023). The committee then severely criticized the national gas exploitation policy as the national cash cow that had caused many victims among the people of Groningen. A series of mining-induced earthquakes had incurred extensive damage to the homes of Groningen residents and jeopardized their safety. Looking back, gas exploitation in Groningen is a clear case of policy inaction: the national government increasingly received alarming signals and concerns about its mining policy and had ample time and opportunity to intervene. For a long time, the government denied that the earthquakes were a result of mining. The large number of earthquakes that would follow (the inquiry committee speaks of a total of 1,615 earthquakes) and the increase in intensity would hardly change this policy inaction for decades (IC 2023, 7). To illustrate the policy inaction of this case, we highlight three specific moments.

First, in 1993, an Earthquake research advisory committee (BOA) pointed out that gas extraction could in fact cause earthquakes—implying damage and safety risks resulting from government policy. The uncertainties prevailing at that time should have been a reason for more research into the risks (Dutch Safety Board [DSB] 2015; IC 2023). Instead, the state officials and the commercial partners Shell and Exxon, gladly accepted the reassuring forecasts (based on limited empirical observations) of the BOA researchers that earthquakes would only be mild and inconsequential. Government officials saw no reason for further investigation, nor for a precautionary approach.

Second, new legislation on Mining in 2003, which aimed to "provide one clear framework for both efficiency and accountability of Mining," could have made a difference (Mbw 2002). The number of earthquakes had increased to an average of more than ten per year since 1993, often with tremors between 2.0 and 3.0 on the Richter scale. The earthquakes were no longer "mild and inconsequential" as initial forecasts stated (IC 2023, 40), and the Dutch meteorological institute (KNMI) adjusted its estimates on the maximum severity of the earthquakes twice. Still, the 2003 Mining Act did nothing to change the high degree of autonomy of the gas policy sector, leaving intact a "closed, inner circle with a strong consensus orientation" (DSB 2015, 88) and a clear preference for continued high levels of gas extraction.

Third, after an earthquake in the town of Huizinge in 2012, the State Supervision of Mines (SSM in Dutch: SodM) warned the Minister of Economic Affairs that its new analyses confirmed a direct causal relation between the intensity of gas extraction and the intensity of earthquakes. As the earthquakes occurred relatively close to the surface, the safety risk was much greater than initially assumed. The risk assessment suddenly included more than incremental damage: the safety of the local citizens was at stake due to continued gas drillings. The head of the SSM warned the Ministry that gas extraction in Groningen should be stopped as quickly and as completely as possible (Hearing De Jong, 31). The Minister instead commissioned extensive new research into the matter, meanwhile leaving the gas extraction plans unchanged (Hearing Kamp 2022, 46). In fact, gas extraction increased in 2013 and 2014 to a substantially higher level than in the years before.

Childcare benefits scandal

In the *childcare benefits scandal*, the tax authority wrongly accused thousands of parents of making fraudulent benefit claims (see Peeters and Widlak 2023). These parents often had to pay back the allowances they had received in their entirety. In many cases, the total sum amounted to tens of thousands of euros, plunging many Dutch families into debt or bankruptcy. At various points, signals about disproportionate consequences for families emerged. Societal actors and lower-level tax officials, particularly those handling complaints, increasingly expressed "objections and doubts" about the "all-or-nothing" approach through which the State reclaimed benefits (AUT 2020). However, despite these signals, policymakers systematically failed to intervene or explicitly chose not to do so. Again, three specific moments are noted.

First, at various moments from 2010 onwards (primarily in 2012 and 13), the Tax Authority and the Social Affairs Ministry (SZW) were confronted with the "Appelbloesem case," a daycare facility under investigation implicating a large number of families standing accused of fraud. The Tax authority initially reclaimed all benefits that involved parents had received: They had not paid any personal contributions, so they were not lawfully entitled to any childcare allowances. Members of parliament, childcare associations, and various media reports raise the alarm about the harsh implications of a full reclaiming for involved parents (Van der Steen 2022, 26). Although these signals are discussed by both Tax Authority and SZW officials, the conclusion was that there is no need to change the law; it just had to be explained better.

Second, in 2014 signals from cases of another childcare agency, *De Parel*, again indicate that the "all or nothing" approach to reclaiming benefits is highly problematic (POK 2020, 22). Given their discomfort in observing the severe consequences of reclaiming for citizens, some tax officials want to explore the possibilities of "proportional granting," (i.e., only reclaiming the amount of indebted personal contributions). Internal escalation within the tax authority eventually led to discussions with SZW-counterparts on possibilities to change the law. However, to avoid the impression of "free childcare," the conclusion of these discussions was that the law and the "all or nothing"-approach should remain intact. The Minister of SZW was—allegedly—never explicitly informed about these internal discussions (Hearing Asscher 2020).

Third, in November 2016, the National Ombudsman starts an investigation into potential wrongdoings to approximately 300 families in relation to reclaiming benefits, explicitly regarding the "all-or-nothing" approach. In parallel, the tax authority management conducts an internal investigation on these issues (Hearing Palmen-Schlangen 2020). Although both the internal investigation and the Ombudsman conclude that the Tax authority had acted “reprehensibly” (laakbaar), violated various legal principles, and that parents were entitled to compensation, no further policy action is taken. Policymakers within the Tax Authority interpreted the matter to be an isolated incident. Rather than changing the “all-or-nothing”-approach of reclaiming benefits, they asserted that cases of wrongdoings and potential compensation should be discussed on a case-by-case basis (POK 2020, 18). The large-scale reclaiming of benefits continued.

Premises of policy inaction

Both cases resulted in considerable policy upheaval down the road, culminating in a Parliamentary Interrogation in 2020 and Parliamentary Inquiries in 2022 and 2023. The question of why no one drastically intervened or decided on an alternative course of action, is of similar pertinence to both cases. Patterns of inaction imply that structural forces are at play that guide and limit decision-making. To understand these patterns, we argue that we need to better understand the decision premises that form the *situational mechanisms* for the information-processing and decision-making of involved actors. The sum of their resulting individual actions and the institutional environment in which they interacted constitute the *transformative mechanisms* that explain the outcomes. Following the structure of our theoretical argument, we identify the prevalent decision premises along the lines of *goals*, *structures*, and *accountability/communication lines* and link them to the patterns of inaction characterizing both cases.

Goal programming: one goal to rule them all

Both cases have very clearly formulated policy goals that became firmly established mantras by which involved policymakers acted, making it difficult to consider alternatives outside of the scope of these goals. In the *Groningen gas extraction case*, the overriding objective of profit maximization fundamentally shaped policy, leading to a pervasive disregard for public safety concerns. From the very outset in the 1960s, a formal agreement between the Dutch State and commercial partners Shell and Exxon formalized the goal to profit as much as possible from gas extraction and sales for the national budget, without disturbing the energy market (ABDTOPConsult 2014). Within this agreement the Dutch government primarily adopted a role of revenue collector, without much concern for direct operational control of the gas extractions or its associated risks. This initial, profit-driven mandate firmly entrenched a one-sided view of gas extractions where financial gain trumped all other considerations.

Although the seismic risks of gas extraction were largely unknown at the time, problematic information about the causal link between gas drillings and earthquakes would occasionally surface (see moments of inaction). However, for involved policymakers, such concerns directly threatened the primary concern of securing national revenues. The hearings by the DSB (2015) demonstrate how information signals were systematically downplayed, ignored, or actively questioned. The formalized goal of revenue maximization became the yardstick by which ministry officials and policymakers were held accountable, creating a policy environment in which concerns about citizen safety or natural stewardship consistently lost out. Information signals or concerns jeopardizing the holy goal of securing national revenues would gather little traction or support. As one interviewee noted on trying to persuade policymakers of the need to more quickly reduce the gas mining, “there wasn’t any support there, because politically there was simply another line regarding the extraction–profit and money” (Hearing Van den Berg 2002, 46).

Similarly, the *Dutch childcare benefits scandal* shows how an overarching focus on fraud detection led to a blatant disregard for due process and the well-being of large groups of citizens. The Childcare Act of 2004 and the General Act on Means-Tested Benefits (AWIR) of 2005 established strict eligibility criteria, notably requiring demonstrable personal contributions for childcare (AWIR 2005; Wko 2004). However, this foundational legal framework was quickly overshadowed by a heightened political emphasis on combatting fraud (POK 2020, 37). In years that followed, high-profile fraud cases, particularly the “Bulgarian Fraud,” fueled a political discourse that prioritized fraud prevention over service provision. This led to a significant tightening of the AWIR, granting the Tax Authority extensive powers to identify fraud using risk profiles based on demographics, effectively casting citizens as potential suspects from the outset (Frederik 2020).

This singular focus on fraud minimization, combined with the policy mantra that “childcare is not free,” deeply influenced the mindset of government officials. As one senior tax official described, a “stubborn insistence” emerged that any failure to meet the personal contribution requirement automatically invalidated the right to an allowance (Hearing Veld 2020, 104). This created an environment where officials easily dismissed concerns about parents facing severe hardship due to harsh repayment demands. Similarly, for tax officials, the directive to combat fraud became a key goal, often to the detriment of their role in service provision. When confronted with a potential fraud case, the immediate response was to halt and reclaim benefits, often through automated decision-making (see Peeters and Widlak 2023). Citizens were primarily viewed through the lens of potential fraudsters, making it incredibly difficult for tax officials to consider other concerns such as due process or the welfare of affected families (Hearing Blokpoel, 56).

Organizational structure

Both cases also show how organizational structures potentially drive patterns of policy inaction, becoming filters through which involved policy officials come to see the world. In the Groningen gas case, the policy responsibility for gas drillings and their revenues was placed in the *Ministry of Economic Affairs*, a ministry primarily concerned with the Dutch business climate and its international competitiveness. Within this ministry, the policy responsibility was further siloed within (sub)units focused on the energy market (National Archive, n.d.), creating role descriptions primarily favoring market concerns. This structure also provided a clear mandate for the (single) state representative participating in the board of the gas exploitation consortium, the formal partnership governing the exploitation of the Groningen gas field. Their core responsibility was ensuring sustained gas revenues for the national budget and maintaining stability for the energy market.

As a consequence, the primary lens for involved policymakers at an energy market unit became one of staying competitive and avoiding market disturbances. Their immediate concern, whenever new developments or troubling information emerged, was what the implications would be for gas revenues (IC 2023). As a result, the occasional signals that surfaced on the potential risks of gas extraction for public safety or the environment simply did not register. During the inquiry hearings, the Energy Market director at the Ministry admitted that a risk management policy did not even exist (Hearing De Groot 2022, 53). The Ministry's core mandate and the energy market unit's focus revolved around the continuity of gas provision and the securing of state revenues. This focus ensured that problematic policy signals related to public safety were either never seen as relevant or were systematically downplayed. When asked during the parliamentary inquiry hearings, a high-level director of the ministry answered that it was not his task to serve safety interests (Hearing Dessens 2022, 25).

In the childcare benefits case, the organizational structure of the tax authority similarly reflected priorities about fraud detection, especially after 2013 with the creation of a dedicated anti-fraud team (Inquiry Committee 2024). This intensified the focus on combating fraud, with fraud control being structurally monitored at the highest managerial level. As one high-level tax official noted, "in the total workload of service provision—regular checks, information, and all kinds of other things—there was a real increase in focus on fraud control" (Hearing Blokpoel 2020). This emphasis even made fraud detection a business model for the tax authority, with special investigative teams (CAF [*Combinatieteam Aanpak Facilitators*] and IST [*Integraal Subjectgericht Toezicht*]) being set up with the obligation of generating revenue for supervisory ministries through cost reductions from stricter fraud detection (Frederik 2020).

Beyond being a policy goal, the emphasis on fraud detection was thus hardwired into the organizational structure of the tax authority, even as a mandated source of income. However, as one senior tax official described, the source of income also was an expected revenue for the supervisory ministries and as such it became a burden (Hearing Van den Bospoort 2023). At the same time, the transfer of childcare allowance policy to the Ministry of Social Affairs in 2010 further cemented its role as a labor market instrument. In the labor market policy domain, childcare was viewed through a macro-economic lens, leading officials to systematically treat individual cases of parental hardship as isolated incidents, rather than signals for policy reform (Van der Steen et al. 2022). Combined with specialized units within the tax authority, driven by performance targets for fraud detection, organizational structures created a powerful filter for policy officials through which citizens were approached, turning fraud detection into a primary concern and considering disproportionate consequences of reclaiming as mere collateral damage.

Accountability and communication lines

In terms of accountability and communication lines, two aspects play a crucial role in both cases. First, a clear division of responsibilities led to a separation of policymakers from the actors signaling policy problems. Second, the hierarchical layers through which these information signals subsequently had to climb clearly diminished the urgency of these signals.

In the context of the Groningen gas extraction, a critical factor contributing to policy inaction was the structural autonomy and the rigid role division within the consortium ("Gasgebouw") through which the Dutch State and commercial partners collaborated. The influence of Dutch national government was severely limited by this public-private 'gas agreement', with only a single state representative on the boards of the gas exploitation consortium. Although this already affected the volume and quality of information provision toward policy officials and lawmakers, crucially the State's own representatives within the consortium did not perceive it as their role to voice societal concerns or share information from within the partnership with external actors (Hearing Dessens 2022, 82; Hearing Van Hoogstraten 2022, 63). This insulated structure of the Gasgebouw inherently limited the channels through which problematic information signals could penetrate the policymaking sphere.

This rigid role division and shielding of information also hampered the work of the regulatory authority, the Dutch State Supervision of Mines (SSM), which since long signaled the potential earthquake risks associated with gas extraction. Despite its mandate, SSM found itself systematically disempowered, with severely limited access to crucial exploitation data to make its case and, more critically, to the political executives at the Ministry of Economic Affairs. The "ladder of escalation" to communicate problematic information signals became progressively longer as SSM's primary contact within the ministry over time shifted from the Minister itself to increasingly lower-level policy officials (Hearing De Jong, 6). Furthermore, SSM was legally bound to rely on the commercial operator (NAM) for operational information, research data and compliance. The Ministry essentially granted the NAM a near-monopoly on vital information (Hearing De Jong, 8). This structural dependency meant that SSM's concerns were often dismissed or not taken seriously, as the data on seismicity was unavailable and the formal responsibility for seismic risk signaling was attributed elsewhere (e.g., at the KNMI, the Dutch meteorological institute).

The cumulative effect of these rigid role divisions and hierarchical barriers was a significant dampening of critical policy signals within the Ministry on the relation between gas extraction and earthquakes. While during the hearings, political executives publicly referred to SSM as the responsible authority for safety (Hearing De Groot 2022, 25; Hearing Verhagen 2022, 42), the SSM was in practice explicitly excluded from key ministerial discussions concerning production increases (Hearing De Jong, 6). The agency tasked with safety oversight thus lacked the necessary access, authority, and resources to effectively perform its duties or ensure its warnings were heard at the highest levels. The systemic inability of problematic signals to penetrate these entrenched hierarchical layers and rigid functional boundaries ultimately contributed to a prolonged period of policy inaction.

In the childcare benefits scandal, rigid role divisions and hierarchical structures within government also facilitated patterns of policy inaction. The Childcare Act of 2004 explicitly delineated responsibilities in which the Ministry of Social Affairs crafted the legislation, while the Tax Authority was charged with its implementation (Wko 2004). While a clear separation of policy and execution is not unusual, this specific setup related to childcare benefits lacked a robust supervisory framework, with various ministries "owning" different allowance types and the Ministry of Finance overseeing the Tax Authority at a distance (AR 2020). This fragmented ownership, coupled with the Tax Authority's self-perception as a mere implementer of the law, created an environment where none of the involved government actors took responsibility for the growing problems related to harsh reclaiming.

This strict adherence to perceived roles led to a dangerous cycle of blame and inaction. The Tax Authority, viewing its role solely as executing existing law, would cease action once the Ministry dismissed its concerns about harsh reclaiming, concluding that this dismissal is what the legislative wants (Hearing Blankestijn 2023). Conversely, involved policymakers from the Ministry of Social Affairs often classified the unintended consequences of the policy, such as parents facing severe financial distress, as mere "implementation problems"—that is, an issue for the tax authority to deal with, not a strategic policy matter (Hearing Kamp 2023). These deeply ingrained role perceptions, although often unaddressed and unchecked through direct communication, acted as powerful filters for information processing. They shaped how troubling signals of harsh reclaiming were interpreted and ultimately ignored, demonstrating a lack of problem ownership that perpetuated a pattern of policy inaction.

Further exacerbating this issue was the inherent hierarchical structuring within both the Tax Authority and its supervisory ministries. Operational concerns at lower levels faced a long and arduous climb up the bureaucratic ladder. For instance, given formal communication channels, the Tax Authority's concerns could only enter the Ministry at the fourth hierarchical rung, significantly dampening the urgency of critical information signals. Each hierarchical level acted as a filter, where responsible officials decided which information was important enough to be escalated. Concerns that were not a primary focus or directly aligned with formalized policy goals had a diminished chance of survival, with information often translated into sterile policy memos rather than urgent pleas for intervention. As a responsible state secretary stated, in response to tax officials who reported severe discomfort ("tummy ache") about the issue, at the executive level no memo surfaced indicating this tummy ache (Hearing Wiebes 2020, 27). Likewise, both a director and the Minister of Social Affairs noted that no one ever directly communicated their unease, never seeing anyone "at their desk" to plea for necessary changes (Hearing Van Tuyll 2020, 63; Hearing Asscher, 86–7). Problematic information signals about harsh reclaiming seemingly got bogged down in layers of bureaucracy (Hearing Weekers 2020, 74).

Discussion

The patterns of policy inaction observed in both the Groningen gas extraction and childcare benefits scandals demonstrate how organizational goals, structures, and accountability lines interact to shape decision premises. These premises act as powerful filters, influencing how individual policymakers perceive the world and, in turn, leading to collective failures to address critical issues. While our cases show a lot of intentional action by involved actors, the collective pattern of policy inaction they create have clear inadvertent and unintended consequences. We identify four theoretical mechanisms by which such patterns of inaction are created, leveraging the earlier formulated framework of situational, action-formation, and transformational mechanisms to illuminate how macro-level phenomena are rooted in micro-level actions and interactions and the role that decision premises play therein.

Formalized policy objectives as organizational mantras

In both cases, strongly articulated policy objectives, such as maximizing gas profits in Groningen or minimizing fraud in childcare, transformed into organizational mantras. Repeatedly emphasized by political leadership, these goals became deeply ingrained within ministries, leading policymakers to internalize specific assumptions about their ministry's nature, purpose, and role (Selznick 1957). This process establishes the decision-making context within which individual policymakers operate, creating a "policy paradigm" (Hall 1993) or "institutional logic" (Thornton and Ocasio 2008) that—implicitly or explicitly—guides their actions and decisions. Once institutionalized, these assumptions form the unquestioned premises upon which individual actions and decisions are based.

For policymakers, they determine the plausibility of ideas, the problems worthy of attention, and the appropriate instruments to tackle them. For cases such as the childcare benefits scandal (similar to the Robodebt scheme in Australia), such a dominant framework can manifest itself as a "clawback logic" in which reclaiming taxpayer money is prioritized over considerations like due process or transparency (Moynihan et al. 2025). Alternatively, it can simply provide a one-sided overarching logic dedicated to a single public value, trumping all other considerations (e.g., guaranteeing revenues over safety, efficiency over privacy). Clear goals provide focus, channeling organizational efforts and helping decision-makers navigate complexity. Decision premises clarify which issues warrant attention and by creating a particular value ordering, policymakers do not constantly have to deliberate about competing goals and values (Ocasio 1997). However, this focus also creates a bias in information-processing, narrowing the organization's horizon and creating blind spots (Kühl 2024; Luhmann 1995). Policymakers only act on information in line with the overarching goals and premises, not on ill-structured indicators of 'other' problems, creating patterns of inaction.

Organizational structures as cognitive blinders

The biases in information processing stemming from overarching goals are significantly amplified when these goals are hardwired into organizational structures and targets. In the childcare case, the focus on fraud detection became formalized into the organizational fabric of the tax authority, both through the creation of separate teams focusing on fraud detection and through a specific means of financing. For the gas extraction case, policy responsibility was placed with a unit primarily concerned with the functioning of the energy market. The specific roles and responsibilities of the teams and units in which policymakers operate function as a cognitive lens through which they perceive the environment and interpret information signals. In that sense, the structuring of tasks and functions through specialization, while intended to mitigate the limitations of bounded rationality by focusing attention on relevant aspects of the environment, can also distort information flows (Van der Heijden 2024). The information processed is inevitably shaped by the narrow perspectives of the individuals occupying specialized positions within the organizational hierarchy. This can result in crucial information or problematic signals being overlooked or discarded along the way (Csaszar 2012; Jacobides 2007). Furthermore, decision premises can reflect in-group biases, leading unit members to prioritize information and expertise generated within their own groups while systematically devaluing input from external sources (Reitzig and Sorenson 2013).

Hierarchical dampening of information signals

Hierarchical layers and relationships play an important role in the accuracy and urgency of the information signals that political officials receive. In the childcare case, the responsible minister and top civil servants reported that they were aware of the issues, but not of its urgency. Similarly, in the Groningen case, the inspectorate warning of the dangers of gas extraction failed to effectively communicate its concerns. The hierarchical layers through which information signals must travel in ministerial departments seemingly dampened the urgency of these signals. Due to information asymmetries within hierarchies, higher-level officials must largely rely on the information presented to them by subordinates (Hammond 1986). However, subordinates may be reluctant to convey negative news to their superiors, leading to a "sugarcoating" of information and a distorted picture of the situation (Fang, Kim, and Milliken 2014).

Hierarchical settings often encourage conformity to the perceived desires of superiors (Keum and See 2017). Moreover, individuals operating at lower hierarchical levels, may experience a diminished sense of control, hindering their motivation to challenge existing approaches (Reitzig and Maciejovsky 2015). In that sense, increased hierarchical layers often create a buffer around higher-level decision-makers, reducing the volume of information they receive (see Workman, Jones, and Joachim 2009). Organizational hierarchy can be seen as an explicit way in which individual efforts and information are aggregated inside the organization (Barney and Felin 2013; Joseph and Gaba 2020), which explains how more and more considerations get discarded along the way. Ministerial departments are shaped like pyramids, with the focus of attention narrowing at the top. Information signals unaligned with the premises emphasized by particular role descriptions have a smaller chance of surfacing. This filtering process potentially also discards valuable information and diverse perspectives at earlier stages. Organization scholars have observed that additional organizational layers can significantly delay responses to budgetary signals (e.g., Carpenter 1996; Padgett 1980). This phenomenon likely applies to policy signals more broadly. Furthermore, multiple hierarchical layers create additional veto points within the organization, increasing the likelihood that critical policy signals are suppressed.

Rigid role divisions and the avoidance of responsibility

Both cases also demonstrate the complexities of inter-organizational information flow. Problematic signals not only had to travel up the organizational hierarchy of ministerial departments but also originated from external sources. In the Groningen case, crucial insights on the implications of gas extraction came from the mining watchdog and local authorities to the Ministry of Economic Affairs, while in the childcare case, the tax authority provided critical information on the problematic implications of fraud detection to the Ministry of Social Affairs. The rigid role divisions between the ministry and these external agencies created severe coordination challenges and hindered effective information processing. Both cases exhibited a pronounced division between policymaking and implementation responsibilities (cf. Dowding and Taflaga 2022). These distinct roles significantly influenced the interpretation and response to information.

Implementing agencies often sought to minimize their responsibility after formally reporting concerns, while policymakers tended to dismiss these signals as isolated incidents or mere "implementation problems." This created a significant barrier to policy action, with both parties avoiding responsibility (Hood 2011). The lack of problem ownership ensured the status quo prevailed. Furthermore, rigid role divisions fostered perceptions of legitimate communication channels and entry points. Kuhl (2024) emphasizes that decision-making processes are often confined to a narrow circle of authorized actors, excluding many valuable sources of information. While a diverse range of stakeholders possess crucial insights, existing structures frequently impede their meaningful involvement in the decision-making process. This restricted access can limit the diversity of information considered in decision-making and contributes to patterns of policy inaction.

In sum, patterns of policy inaction emerge from the interplay between macro-level structures and micro-level behaviors through four mechanisms: (1) the internalization of formalized policy objectives, (2) the cognitive biases induced by organizational structures, (3) the dampening effect of hierarchical information flow, and (4) the avoidance of responsibility due to rigid role divisions. The situational mechanisms establish the context, defining the parameters of perception and action through ingrained goals and fragmented responsibilities. Within these established situations, action-formation mechanisms dictate how individual policymakers process information, prioritize concerns, and choose to act (or not act), influenced by their organizational mandates, hierarchical pressures, and perceived roles. Finally, the aggregation of these micro-level actions and interactions, compounded by the biased filtering and responsibility avoidance that organizational structures and accountability lines create, constitutes the transformational mechanisms that translate individual omissions and structural limitations into pervasive, collective patterns of policy inaction at the macro-level, often with severe societal consequences.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how decision premises embedded in the institutional structures of governmental bureaucracies can create patterns of policy inaction. Formalized policy objectives can become organizational mantras, creating blind spots and limiting the consideration of alternatives. Organizational structures, while intended to enhance efficiency, can also channel attention in biased directions, leading to potential errors of omission. Hierarchical layers, intended to shield top-level officials from information overload, dampen the urgency of policy signals and hence the perceived need to act. Finally, rigid role divisions between policymaking and (implementation) agencies can exacerbate the avoidance of responsibility, as vital concerns are often dismissed as isolated incidents or mere implementation issues. Together, these mechanisms clarify how “institutions matter” for individual and organizational information-processing and, ultimately, patterns of policy inaction.

Considering the role of decision premises is crucial, as it helps us link macro-level structures to micro-level actions and interactions (see Jilke et al. 2019). By bridging the institutional and individual levels, we move beyond the general inertia captured by path dependency and the vague norms of institutional logics to show how these concepts work out *on the ground*—by creating structural and cognitive biases that dictate attention and information processing within government bureaucracies. This framework offers a robust alternative to explanations rooted in political intentionality or the inherent “wickedness” of problems, showing instead that non-intervention often stems from the systematic inability of government bureaucracies to process information that challenges their established, formalized parameters. In doing so, this article not only enhances our understanding of how crucial information signals can be systematically ignored, questioned, or downplayed by organizational actors, but also offers indications for how such collective failures might be avoided in the future.

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