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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A framework for analyzing policy goals: introducing the SPYDER indicator

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ABSTRACT

To enable systematic and precise description and assessment of policy goals, an often-neglected aspect of policy design – we introduce the Structured Policy Goals Indicator (SPYDER). This original tool was developed through qualitative content analysis of more than 5000 goals from real-world strategic documents. SPYDER captures both the thematic orientation and the technical structure of policy goals, allowing for systematic analysis of how countries, regional associations, and international organizations articulate and operationalize their policy aims. Developed in a single-country case and subsequently tested and verified using a sample of international documents, the approach provides a replicable and flexible methodological framework for grasping the elusive and complex nature of policy goals for both practical and scientific purposes.

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Policy design; policy goals; policy indicator; qualitative content analysis; goal operationalization

When spiders unite, they can tie up a lion.

(folk proverb)

1. Introduction

Policy goals embody an elusive nature: they are at once the central, concrete element of policy design and, simultaneously, an empirical normative claim. Their relevance is beyond dispute. Policy goals represent the guiding thread that weaves meaning and direction into political life. They endow political institutions with purpose and coherence, justifying the wide range of collective actions undertaken in their name. As normative signposts, they confer legitimacy upon political activity by translating values, worldviews, and ideologies into tangible determinations that orient public governance. They also establish a standard against which political elites may be held accountable, while at the same time embodying the democratic essence of a political system (Petek 2022). In this sense, policy goals are more than formal governmental declarations: they are manifestations of a shared vision of the future for a community, serving as the normative element of policy design that projects what is yet to come.

At the same time, their realization depends on their clarity and precision. To fulfill the visions they contain, and to genuinely transform social practices, economic conditions, and natural environments, policy goals cannot remain mere "nice talk." The degree of lucidity, combined with the fabric from which policy goals are woven, is crucial for the practical impact they produce across diverse actors – from political elites and bureaucrats to activists, experts, and citizens. Yet policy sciences still lack a tool capable of grasping the complex nature of policy goals as both an empirical phenomenon and a scientific concept. This article therefore seeks to strengthen the concept's analytical

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and practical value by offering an original framework for mapping and assessing policy goals, one grounded in empirical public policy theory.

What we propose is situated within policy design theory, which has long distinguished between policy design (the structural and substantive content of policies) and policy designing (the processes and actors involved in formulation and implementation) (Capano and Howlett 2021; Bakir et al. 2024; Howlett 2011; Howlett and Mukherjee 2014, 2017; Schneider 2013; Siddiki and Curley 2022; Sidney 2007). Goals, as the substantive content of policy design, have received much less attention in terms of conceptual definition, empirical investigation, and classification than policy instruments (starting with the standard NATO classification, Hood and Margetts 2007). Yet coherence, congruence, and consistency – all necessary to produce quality policy design – rest equally on goals and instruments, as well as on their interrelationships (Howlett, Mukherjee, and Rayner 2014; van Geet et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the systematic appraisal of policy goals, across sectors, governance levels, and countries, remains underdeveloped.

To gain reliable and valid insight into any policy phenomenon, emerging policy theory should firstly provide a clear definition of the scope of the research, its research questions, and comparison strategies; and then precise measurement of key concepts, by connecting units of observations and units of analysis, especially through indicators that guide what data to collect and how (Workman and Weible 2022). To contribute to the advancement of policy design theory, both in academic and practical contexts, we propose the Structured Policy Goals Indicator (SPYDER), a tool intended to translate the content dimension of policy design into a measurable framework.

The indicator is constructed inductively from data on policy practice, drawing on a qualitative content analysis of more than 2000 policy goals in Croatian strategic documents and subsequently verified on an international dataset of over 3000 policy goals. We identify two key dimensions of policy goals: what goals aim to achieve (thematic content) and how they are formulated (technical structure). These two dimensions are intertwined, and their occurrences vary across documents, sectors, governance levels, and countries. By visualizing these patterns, SPYDER provides a means of assessing policy design in detail, serving both scientific inquiry and practical application.

2. Relevance for policy practice and governance quality

Beyond its analytical contribution, SPYDER has direct practical relevance for policy practitioners and decision-makers. By systematically linking the thematic content of policy goals with their technical structure, the indicator provides a rigorous basis for assessing their implementation readiness. In the context of contemporary, complex policymaking in any sector – where coordination across actors and activities is crucial – well-designed policy goals function as key orientation devices. In that context, SPYDER allows policymakers and strategic planners within governmental bodies to assess, at an early stage, the alignment between political ambition and technical feasibility, thereby identifying potential blind spots related to responsibility allocation, timelines, and evaluability. An additional practical advantage of the indicator lies in its ability to provide a precise, politically neutral basis for comparison across policy sectors and governance levels, both ex ante and ex post, thereby supporting broader sectoral coordination. Beyond governmental use, SPYDER also offers non-governmental actors, political opposition, civil society, and economic stakeholders a systematic tool for assessing design coherence and implementation capacity, as well as for identifying omissions and formulating informed critiques or reform proposals, using policy goals as a central analytical entry point.

Furthermore, SPYDER can be analytically linked to broader facets of governance quality. The indicator captures key preconditions of effective governance by revealing how precisely political priorities are translated into administratively manageable commitments. The technical dimension of policy goals reflects capacities related to coordination, accountability, and implementation planning, as it makes visible the presence – or absence – of responsible actors, timeframes, and measurability criteria. At the same time, the thematic dimension indicates how governance systems balance sectoral problem-solving with cross-cutting values, procedural improvement, instrument choice, and evaluation standards. Taken together, these dimensions position SPYDER as an indirect measure of policy design quality, capturing the extent to which governance arrangements can structure collective action prior

to implementation. In this sense, SPYDER complements outcome-oriented governance indicators by focusing on the design phase as a critical, yet often overlooked, component of governance quality.

The article proceeds in three steps. First, we begin by revisiting the conceptual foundations of policy goals as a central element of policy design and introduce the two dimensions through which they can be systematically captured: their thematic orientation (what they seek to achieve) and their technical structure (how they are formulated). We then present the SPYDER, developed through qualitative analysis of real-world policy documents, and demonstrate how it applies these dimensions to classify and assess goals in practice. In the final section, we reflect on the broader implications of SPYDER, highlighting both its limitations and its potential to inform comparative analysis, support the development of governance indices, and enhance the capacity of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to evaluate and improve the quality of policy design across diverse contexts.

3. Unveiling the elusiveness of policy goals

If an empirical phenomenon is elusive, complex, and difficult to grasp, pure theoretical work will always fall short. The high diversity of policy goals in policymaking practice prevents their conceptualization solely through thought experiments and deductive reasoning. Therefore, in-depth and broad systematic empirical analysis is the only way to capture their nuances. Our analysis of policy goals in real-world policymaking revealed substantial differences in both their substance and form, which can be measured and compared across countries, levels, and sectors (Petek et al. 2021). The analysis focused on two core aspects: what the goal seeks to achieve (its thematic content) and how it is formulated (its technical structure).

The thematic dimension categorizes policy goals by their intended purpose or orientation (Petek et al. 2021). Strategic documents from real-world policymaking practice reveal that the issues and topics goals contain are extremely diverse. Scholars and practitioners alike primarily understand policy goals as focusing on the outputs and outcomes of specific sectors. This is the most common thematic type of policy goal, as such goals often project concrete products intended to upgrade particular sectors and/or enhance the well-being and benefits of all citizens, some social groups, or specific types of individuals.

However, four additional thematic types of goals also frequently appear in policy practice. Some policy goals are "cross-listed" throughout the political system, typically reflecting constitutional, democratic, or worldview values – these are value-oriented goals that nurture the fundamental foundations of the political order and the community. Where the purpose is to improve the decision-making process in its various aspects, policy designs in practice set process-oriented goals. The concepts of policy goals and policy instruments sometimes overlap (Dunn 1994). The thematic dimension of policy goals is sensitive to this feature and captures it with the instrument-oriented type of policy goals. These goals reveal how policy design may explicitly emphasize the introduction of new instruments or the reform of existing ones. Finally, evaluation-oriented goals also appear in policy practice. This thematic type specifies diverse evaluation criteria to be met in the future as part of policy design.

Therefore, "goals are not merely governmental statements about desired futures but more specifically governmental statements about desired futures in relation to specific sectoral purposes, values, and principles in democratic political systems, policymaking process improvements, necessary instrumental innovations, and evaluation standards that should be fulfilled" (Petek et al. 2021: 465). All these types are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Thematic types of policy goals.

Thematic type	Description
Sector-oriented	Denotes improvements or desired outcomes of policymaking in specific policy sector as benefits for individuals, social groups, or all citizens, and to problem-solving within specific subsystems
Value-oriented	Advances core constitutional values or the fundamentals of a political system
Process-oriented	Focuses on internal administrative or procedural improvements
Instrument-oriented	Refers to the adoption or refinement of specific policy tools
Evaluation-oriented	Defines criteria for evaluating performance or outcomes

Source: summarized from Petek et al. (2021).

The technical dimension draws on recurring combinations of six structural elements that are typically present in policy goals. In our earlier study (Petek et al. 2022), we demonstrated that each goal contains a stated purpose, which may range from broadly defined to highly specific and concrete. That purpose should be achieved in some way, so a goal may also include a mode of accomplishment as a structural element. This element shows if the goal is connected to any other element of policy design, to another goal or an instrument. Then, a goal may, on the one hand, contain the beneficiary of its accomplishment and, on the other hand, designate an actor responsible for achieving it by carrying out or coordinating implementation activities. The precision of a goal is further enhanced by two additional elements. One is the time frame, which clearly sets the period within which the goal should be achieved. The other is a quantitative indicator, where a precise numerical figure specifies the scope of the goal and the exact measure by which its accomplishment can be determined.

All named elements could be present or absent from the goal's structure, and they combine in a diverse manner. These combinations result in seven technical goal types, arranged along a continuum of specificity as shown in Table 2. From the range of theoretically possible combinations, we focus only on those observable in real-world policymaking and recurring across the dataset. This typology builds directly on our earlier work (Petek et al. 2022), which developed the framework from rich empirical material, with Croatia serving both as the development case and as a methodological exemplar for demonstrating how policy goals can function as indicators of national policy style.

At one end of the continuum, there are broad goals, which contain only general purposes and no other elements. At the opposite end are fully structured goals, formed with concrete purposes and all other structural elements being present. Between these two extremes lie diverse technical types of policy goals, each containing different combinations of structural elements, some based on broad purposes and others on concrete ones.

Mode-centered goals and actor-centered goals are based on broad purposes: the first additionally includes a mode of accomplishment, while the second also identifies a responsible actor. Direction-centered goals and semi-structured goals build on concrete purposes: the former contains only a mode of accomplishment, while the latter also includes a beneficiary and a time frame. Beneficiary-centered goals, located in the middle of the continuum, are the most diverse: they may be based on either concrete or broad purposes, may or may not specify a mode of accomplishment, but always emphasize the beneficiary as the central element.

In practice, these types are not always hierarchically organized throughout the strategic documents. Structured goals are not necessarily subordinate to all other types. Rather, the continuum reflects how fully policy goals are specified, offering a flexible tool for evaluating the quality of some policy design. By combining two dimensions of policy goals – thematic and technical – SPYDER offers a nuanced measure of policy goals formulation. This enables researchers as well as the practitioners to assess how different policy goals are expressed in the design of specific policy sector, and also to what extent they are operationalized and prepared for the implementation.

Table 2. Technical types of policy goals.

Technical type	Included structural features
Broad goals	Broad purposes, and no other elements
Mode-centered goals	Broad purposes, mode determined, and no other element
Actor-centered goals	Broad purposes, mode determined, responsible actor specified, and no other element
Beneficiary-centered goals	Broad or concrete purposes, mode determined or undetermined, beneficiary existent, and no other element
Direction-centered goals	Concrete purposes, mode determined, and no other element
Semi-structured goals	Concrete purposes, mode determined, beneficiary existent, timeframe specified, and no other element
Structured goals	Concrete purposes and all other elements present

Source: adapted from Petek et al. (202).

4. Illustrative examples of policy goal classification

To demonstrate how the analytical dimensions operate in real-world policy documents, we briefly present several illustrative examples. Consider the following goal: "to protect and strengthen Sweden's long-term competitiveness" (Government Offices of Sweden, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023: 4). On the thematic dimension, this constitutes a sector-oriented goal, as competitiveness is framed as a core objective of economic development. From a technical perspective, however, the goal is highly unstructured. It articulates a broad and open-ended purpose that is inherently non-finite, as competitiveness can always be further enhanced. No additional technical elements are specified: neither the mode of accomplishment, beneficiary, timeframe, quantitative indicator, nor responsible actors are defined. This makes it a clear example of a broad technical type of policy goal – one that is aspirational rather than operational, difficult to translate into concrete action, and only loosely and indirectly connected to other goals or policy instruments within the overall policy design. The opposite case is illustrated by the following goal: "Develop a national framework for early screening and diagnosis of children with autism spectrum disorders" (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2017b: 16). This constitutes a structured policy goal, as it specifies a concrete and finite purpose that can be fully realized (the development of a national framework) and clearly identifies its beneficiary group (children with autism spectrum disorders). The surrounding text of the document further defines a precise deadline (2017), designates responsible actors (the competent ministries for health, science and education, and social policy), and implies a clear indicator (the adoption of a single national framework). The mode of accomplishment is also determined, as the goal simultaneously functions as both an objective and a policy instrument, answering not only what should be achieved but also how it should be achieved. Thematically, this goal combines multiple orientations: a sector-oriented focus on child wellbeing and prevention through screening and diagnosis of autism, a process-oriented emphasis on strategic planning, and an early-intervention logic that introduces an evaluative temporal dimension (code timing).

Positioned between these two extremes – as is the case for most policy goals – is the following example: "facilitating travel for tourists by addressing the lack of information on travel options" (ASEAN, 2016: 10). On the thematic dimension, this goal combines a sector-oriented focus on mobility (travel) with an instrument-oriented orientation through awareness, as it frames information provision as the primary mode of intervention. On the technical dimension, the goal corresponds to a beneficiary-centered type, as it explicitly identifies tourists as the target group. At the same time, it remains only partially specified: while the mode of accomplishment is indicated (addressing information gaps), the overall purpose is open-ended, as facilitating travel cannot be fully completed. No timeframe, responsible actor, or indicator is specified. Taken together, these three short illustrative examples demonstrate the empirical variability of real-world policy goals that can be systematically captured and differentiated using the SPYDER indicator.

5. The development of the structured policy goals indicator (SPYDER)

The name SPYDER stands for SPYDER. At the same time, it intentionally echoes the English word spider. Just as a spider's web catches and reveals what enters it, the SPYDER web captures policy manifestations within policy goals and renders them visible and measurable. This play on words highlights both the methodological rigor of the indicator and the metaphorical image of a web that entangles even the most elusive policy intentions. To extract the full nuances of policy goals in practice, we employed a research design rooted in the comparative public policy approach (Engeli and Rothmayr Allison 2014; Lodge 2007; Petak 2002; Schmitt 2013). We began with a dataset for cross-sectoral comparison and later expanded it to include cross-national comparison into the development of the indicator.

SPYDER was not simply tested on data; it was conceptually developed through it by a data-driven approach to coding. By examining how goals are formulated across a broad sample of sectors, we generated an empirically grounded classification that captures both what policy goals aim to achieve and how precisely they are articulated. The indicator thus emerges directly from empirical work,

serving as the development case and methodological exemplar for how policy goals indicator can function.

The SPYDER indicator was inductively derived through an in-depth empirical analysis of real-world public policies. Main data gathering method was document analysis (Bowen 2009, Esmark and Triantafillou 2007). We examined more than 2000 individual goals from 11 Croatian strategic documents adopted between 2013 and 2020 (see Appendix 1). As the research focused on official policy goals, the sample consisted of governmental strategies, the type of documents most explicitly oriented toward goals. To ensure richness and plurality of the data, the sample included documents from policy sectors traditionally organized around specific activities (education, employment, transportation, national security, and justice). The sampling criteria were sensitive to the diversity of policy areas (Compston 2004). A second set of strategies was then added to capture multisectoral policies focused on specific target groups (gender equality, youth, and people with disabilities; Fink-Hafner 2007). Finally, the sample also included governmental strategies addressing narrower issues that are cross-listed across ministries (domestic violence, enhancing reading, and the wood industry).

The framework was subsequently tested and verified on another document sample containing strategies of international organizations, regional associations, and governments of diverse countries worldwide. In this phase, we coded more than 3000 goals from 15 strategies (see Appendix 2). Several criteria guided the construction of the international sample. Thematic criteria ensured diversity across policy areas, target groups, and narrow issues, mirroring the sectoral plurality of the national sample. A time-span criterion included the most recent strategies in force, rather than matching the Croatian timeframe, to test the validity of categories over time. The sample also spanned multiple governance levels (national and supranational) and included countries from different continents, reflecting varied politico-administrative traditions: Anglo-American, Napoleonic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Latin American, Post-colonial South Asian/African, East Asian, Soviet, and Islamic (Painter and Peters 2010).

The international sample includes documents from the European Union, the United Nations, ASEAN, and IMO and diverse national documents sourced from countries worldwide, namely Chile, Egypt, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, Sweden, and Saudi Arabia. The selected policies cover a range of areas including security, criminal justice, employment, education, science, transportation, gender equality, youth, people with disabilities, drugs, artificial intelligence, mines, trade, investment and global competitiveness, migration and asylum, and development.[1]

The indicator is based on the methodological rules of qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012). This rigorous qualitative strategy, with highly transparent, uniform and systematic coding protocols, enables us to process vast amounts of textual data and extract its dominant aspects and features to develop rich, nuanced and precise description of the dataset. Additionally, qualitative content analysis enables twofold analytical procedures, one being more focused on frequencies of goal appearance and the other one on their meaning. The thematic dimension of policy goals, and categories that fall into this aspect, were developed entirely inductively from the data. The categories for the technical dimension were inspired by William Dunn (1994, 2018) but were substantially simplified and significantly transformed through the process of operationalization for empirical application. Some technical elements were also created inductively (for all methodological details see Petek et al. (2021, 2022)). To generate the results of the indicator, we employed a matrix query in NVivo to cross thematic categories with technical forms.

6. The application of SPYDER

The SPYDER indicator is based on qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012) of policy goals extracted from a diverse sample of national and international strategic documents. Coding procedures differ between the thematic and technical dimensions, as the latter incorporates contextual coding; however, in both cases, each goal is assigned only once in specific main category. The present article focuses on the analytical logic and practical applicability of the indicator, while a detailed discussion of data collection, document sampling, segmenting and coding procedures, and validation strategies is provided in earlier methodological work (see Petek et al. 2021, 2022).

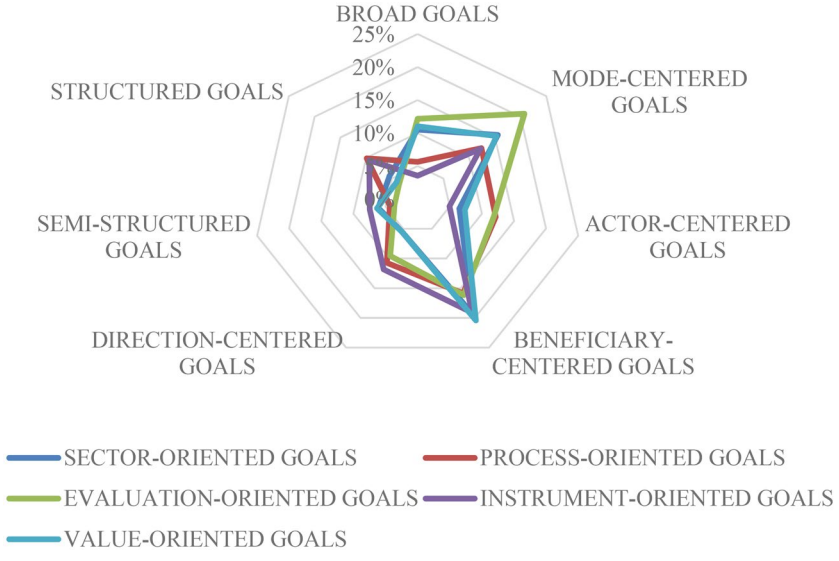
Before turning to the results of SPYDER, it is helpful to briefly describe the nature of the dataset from which the indicator was initially developed. Policy goals, as reflected in Croatian strategic documents, are thematically diverse. Sector-oriented goals dominate, accounting for nearly half of all coded items, while the other types of process-, evaluation-, instrument-, and value-oriented are each present in at least a quarter of the national sample (Petek et al. 2021). On the technical side, beneficiary-centered goals are the most frequent, followed by a range of goals that contain broad purposes with incomplete structural elements. These include mode-centered, actor-centered, and partially beneficiary-centered types. In contrast, structured and semi-structured goals are relatively rare. A substantial portion of goals also lacked sufficient detail to be classified, suggesting that while the thematic content is rich, many goals are under-specified in design (Petek et al. 2022).

Our findings reveal distinct patterns in how policy goals are formulated across the two dimensions. When we cross thematic and technical categories, we find that all thematic types appear across all technical forms indicating that policy goals on any main topic can vary in their structural precision. However, their distribution reveals meaningful tendencies. Sector- and value-oriented goals are the most frequent and tend to be more general. They commonly appear as broad or beneficiary-centered goals and often cluster around mode-centered types as well. This grouping reflects a relatively low level of technical specificity.

In contrast, process- and instrument-oriented goals display a greater degree of technical elaboration. They more frequently appear as direction-centered, semi-structured, or fully structured goals. While they also peak in beneficiary-centered forms, their overall structure is clearer and more detailed than sector- or value-oriented goals. Evaluation-oriented goals stand out as the least specified. Unlike other types, they most often take the form of mode-centered goals and have the highest proportion of broad goals. They are also least likely to include clearly defined responsibilities, timelines, or indicators highlighting a consistent lack of operational detail.

These patterns are summarized visually in Scheme 1, by the radar chart (presenting all documents from Appendix 1). The chart shows how each thematic category distributes across the seven technical types. Sector- and value-oriented goals (in blue) largely overlap, reflecting their shared generality. Process- and instrument-oriented goals (in red and purple) show greater structure, though they differ somewhat in their use of actor-centered forms. Evaluation-oriented goals (in green) appear most distinct, leaning heavily toward mode-centered and general forms with minimal structuring.

This application of SPYDER demonstrates how the structure and content of policy goals can serve as meaningful indicators of general national policy design. In our illustrative example, policy goals reveal important tendencies in the design of national policies, showing a clear prioritization of future

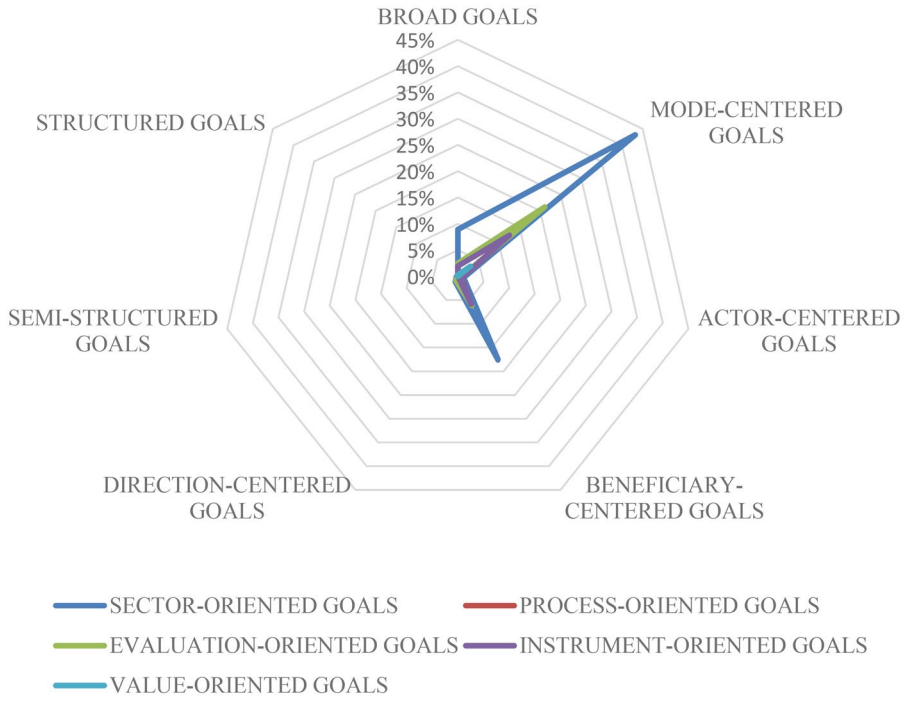


Scheme 1. SPYDER For national cross-sectoral policy design*.
*Distribution of technical goal types across thematic goal categories in whole dataset of Croatian strategic documents (see Appendix 1).

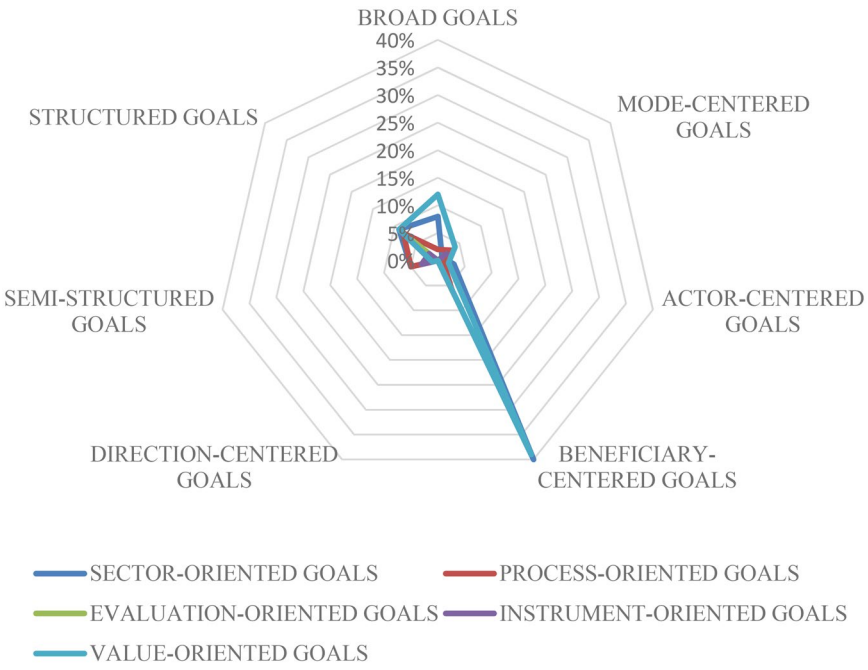
policymaking, particularly through an emphasis on decision-making processes and instrument innovation. This may represent either the highest priority or the weakest aspect of current national policy making, possibly reflecting a "fake it till you make it" approach. Notably, evaluation-oriented goals are the least operationalized, as if they are downloaded through emulation processes and "artificially" incorporated into national policy designs without systematic implementation. If applied to additional countries in this comprehensive manner, the indicator would offer a replicable framework for insightful comparative analysis, illustrating not only the variation in governmental objectives, but also the degree to which governments define their priorities systematically.

But SPYDER can also take other interesting foci, zooming in on a single sector at a specific point in time in any country, or on some other governance levels such as regional associations or international organizations. To illustrate how SPYDER adapts, we present two additional radar charts. From the wide sample of international documents, we selected Saudi Arabia's development policy to move beyond the Western democratic circle and traditional policy sectors (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016; see Appendix 2). This document is characterized by the high dominance of sector-oriented goals and the extremely low share of value-oriented goals. We coded value-oriented goals primarily as constitutional democratic values, which are not aligned with the political system at hand. Still, some core political values, including religious ones, were present in the Saudi Arabia's document and therefore classified as value-oriented goals.

SPYDER further reveals how themes and structures co-occur within goals of Saudi Arabia development policy. It becomes immediately clear that, when analyzing a single sector, technical types vary far less across thematic categories. Thematic types in Saudi Arabia's development policy appear in markedly different proportions (sector-oriented goals account for more than 70%, while value-oriented goals represent less than 5% of all coding units), and yet they all display a strong inclination toward mode-centered and some toward beneficiary-centered technical types (see Scheme 2). The radar chart vividly illustrates, through the similarity of shapes, how defining only the mode of goal accomplishment – or additionally specifying also a beneficiary – emerges as a key feature in structuring policy goals in this case.



Scheme 2. SPYDER For national single sector policy design*.
*Distribution of technical goal types across thematic goal categories in development policy of Saudi Arabia (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, see Appendix 2).



Scheme 3. SPYDER For supranational/regional association's single sector policy design*.
*Distribution of technical goal types across thematic goal categories in gender equality policy of the EU (European Commission, 2020, see Appendix 2).

When moving to the supranational level, we examine EU policy goals, using gender equality policy as the coded example. This case also concerns a single policy, but one distinctive in being organized around target groups and cutting across traditional sectors. SPYDER once again illustrates, briefly, the design of gender equality goals at the EU level (see Scheme 3). In this case-example, sector- and value-oriented goals are both quite highly present (both around 70%), and three other thematic types swing between 20 and 30% of all coding units.[2] The technical diversity of policy goals here in the single EU example is again much lower than when comparing multiple policies, as in the Croatian case. However, the balance is entirely different from that observed in Saudi Arabia's development policy. Not surprisingly, gender equality policy places strong emphasis on beneficiaries, which is why the beneficiary-centered technical type overwhelmingly dominates this policy design.

What is particularly insightful is that, despite differences in governance level, political culture, and policy type, both the EU and Saudi Arabia's documents display consistency in technical types across the thematic categories of policy goals. This provides initial evidence for the validity of the indicator, as our operationalization appears to adequately represent the concept of policy goals and to trace with precision the process of "traveling" from concept to observation and back (Adcock and Collier 2001).

7. Conclusion and outlook

We introduced the SPYDER, a tool designed to assess how policy goals are defined and formulated in national and international strategic documents. Developed through a qualitative analysis of over 5000 goals from real-world strategies, SPYDER identifies recurring patterns in both the thematic orientation and the technical structure of goals. It provides a systematic way to assess how governments articulate their priorities – what they aim to achieve and how precisely they specify the means of achieving them.

SPYDER's strength lies in its methodological transparency and practical relevance. Grounded in policy design theory (Howlett and Mukherjee 2014; Schneider 2013) and supported by clear coding protocols, it operationalizes the content dimension of policy design through an indicator that reflects both substance and form. This framework can be applied across national contexts, policy sectors,

and governance levels, enabling comparative insights into how public problems are defined and addressed. For scholars, it provides a replicable method for advancing policy design research toward data-driven comparison of goals, strongly rooted in observable features. This also supports deeper integration of policy content and design research into the broader field of comparative politics. For policy practitioners, SPYDER offers a practical diagnostic tool to distinguish implementable policy goals from aspirational ones, complementing outcome-oriented governance indicators by focusing on the design phase of policymaking.

At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. Applying SPYDER – as with other systematic indicators – requires significant time, expertise, and resources, which may constrain its immediate scalability. The process of coding is labor-intensive and dependent on access to high-quality strategic documents, which may not be equally available across countries or sectors. Moreover, while SPYDER captures the *formulation* of goals with great precision, it does not by itself evaluate whether these goals are substantively desirable, or normatively legitimate or the outputs they ultimately produce. In this sense, it should be seen as a complementary instrument that needs to be combined with other measures of good governance and policy performance. Finally, methodological decisions regarding weighting of thematic *versus* technical dimensions can influence the outcomes, and future work will need to refine aggregation strategies if SPYDER is to be scaled up for comparative indices.

Despite these challenges, SPYDER holds significant value for practice. By making the formulation of policy goals visible and measurable, it provides relevant insights for evaluating the quality of governance. Policymakers and practitioners can use the framework to reevaluate and improve the design of their strategies, reflecting on the coherence, precision, and inclusiveness of their policy agendas. Beyond individual cases, SPYDER also carries potential for integration into broader governance indices. It could contribute an additional dimension to comparative assessments of governance quality by offering a structured, document-based measure of policy design capacity. In this way, SPYDER can serve not only as a research tool but also as a practical guide for designing and combining goals in specific policies, while providing the foundation for comparative indices that systematically evaluate the quality of governance across countries.

Notes

1. We acknowledge the limitation posed by language barriers and the availability of strategic documents in English.
2. As in qualitative content analysis a single coding unit (one goal) can be coded more than once (though not twice within the same main category), the shares of thematic type appearances exceed 100%.

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