RESEARCH THEME

XLI Cycle – a.y. 2025/2026

Title of the doctoral research   Design for capability building in public sector

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Abstract   Public sector increasingly face societal challenges such as climate change and social inequality, which traditional policy approaches struggle to resolve effectively. The growing complexity of these issues —often called wicked problems—has led governments to adopt mission-oriented policies characterized by ambitious societal goals and coordinated stakeholder actions (Kattel & Mazzucato, 2018). This shift highlights the need of incorporating design methodologies that enable public administrations to build capabilities for navigating complexity and uncertainty more effectively.

In this context, Design Thinking (DT) has emerged as a valuable approach, providing principles such as abductive reasoning, human-centric co-design, and iterative prototyping. These principles help align policies and services closely with citizen expectations and practical needs (Rizzo, Schmittinger & Deserti, 2020).

However, effectively addressing wicked problems also demands a complementary systemic perspective. Systemic Design (SD) integrates DT's strengths with systems thinking, fostering analytical understanding and management of complex interdependencies (Jones, 2014). This research proposes NetZeroCities, part of the EU's mission "100 Climate-Neutral Cities by 2030," as a case study to illustrate SD's role in capability building. Through an analysis of capacity-building initiatives such as the Pilot Cities Programme, Seasonal Schools, and Twinning Learning Programmes, the study highlights how design approaches concretely strengthen public sector capabilities.

Keywords   Systemic design, Capability building, NetZeroCities