



# Convention Theory Applied to the Evaluation of Public Policies: The Example of Literacy

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## Abstract

The need to understand the complexity and global and systematic nature of social issues implies that policies are rarely straightforward. Their objectives generally fall into various rationales. This reality questions the way in which a social policy is evaluated: what effectiveness means, and how can it be measured for a policy with multiple objectives for beneficiaries with multiple expectations? This chapter proposes an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding and

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explaining the different meaningful reference points which underpin social policy: the framework of the economies of worth of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot. In view of this theory, such a policy and its evaluation are part of a specific plan of action: public justification; that is, they must respond to the principles of justice that make them credible and justifiable. These principles of justice refer to different concepts of the common good and give meaning to different types of actions that are highlighted and expressed when evaluating public policy.

This chapter is divided into three sections. First, the rationale of transformation of the societal context in which public and social policies unfold and the implications for the design and practice of evaluation will be briefly characterized. Next, the theoretical framework for understanding multiple rationalities and principles of justice will be outlined. Finally, this framework will be applied in a heuristic perspective to the literacy policy of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (the French-speaking part of Belgium). This application of convention theory demonstrates its relevance to the evaluation of public policy.

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### Keywords

Evaluation · Public policies · Literacy · Convention · Economies of worth · Context of plurality · Rationalities · Controversy

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## 1 Introduction

“A public policy takes the form of a program of government action in a particular sector of society or geographical area” (Mény and Thoenig 1989: 130; own translation). It involves “[...] a set of coordinated actions carried out by a public authority with a view to obtaining a change or evolution in a given situation” (Ennuyer 2020: 1–2; own translation). Public policies are the products of political activity aimed at addressing specific public issues or needs. According to the policy cycle approach (Jones 1984), public policies are developed through a series of stages including agenda setting, formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation.

The process of evaluating policies—assessing their effectiveness, impact, and efficiency—is thus intrinsic to public policy and is designed to ensure that the measures put in place effectively contribute to solving the collective problems to which public resources are allocated. It is widely accepted that evaluation is a democratic requirement that enhances the legitimacy of public policies (chapter ► “The Pragmatic and Democratic Approach to State as a Convention Between Persons”). This legitimacy is founded not only on the democratic principles governing their adoption and implementation but also on the quality of the services they provide to social actors (Knoepfel and Varone 1999: 124; own translation). This requirement is reinforced “[...] in a context of diminishing economic resources and under the influence of New Public Management” (Goter and Khenniche 2022: 36). However, even if the practice of evaluation is more and more sophisticated (Rossi

et al. 2004), it is associated with a lot of tensions and challenges (Minonzio 2008; Salais 2011; Serre 2011), like the need of balancing expectations of various stakeholders or the tension between methodological rigor and the practical constraints faced in real-world evaluations.

Moreover, due to the multiple modes of normativity (chapter ► “[Legal Norms and Convention Theory: Justification, Evaluation, and Realization of Law](#)”) it may cover and articulate, the evaluation of public policies is inherently complex. Different approaches to public policy offer distinct and complementary insights, helping to shed light on this complexity:

- The cognitive approach (Muller 2000) emphasizes how knowledge, beliefs, and mental frameworks influence policymaking and administration. This approach examines how different actors’ understanding of problems and solutions influences how policies are developed and understood. The cognitive analysis of the frames of reference underpinning public policies highlights the plurality of rationalities within the same field of action (Faure et al. 1995; Muller 2000). Evaluating policies in a context of plurality thus requires a detailed analysis of the coexistence or even the “transaction between heterogeneous perspectives” (Muller 2000: 201; own translation).
- Street-level studies concentrate on the implementation phase of public policies, specifically how frontline workers apply policies in their interactions with the public (Lipsky 2010). This perspective demonstrates that public policies are often far from objective and unambiguous (Brodikin 2012). Instead, they are characterized by ambiguity, requiring field agents to interpret and translate them. This process can be influenced by different rationalities, reinforcing the need for transactions between various frames of reference. There is “[...] vagueness surrounding the meaning of measures [...] and [...] divergent interpretations of the solutions adopted” (Palier and Surel 2005: 18). The polysemy and diversity of possible interpretations further complicate the evaluation of public policies.

A third perspective, the pragmatic approach, and more precisely the EC/SC approach, draws the attention to the fact that the different rationalities resulting from this context of plurality still need to be publicly justifiable, that is, they need to be subject to the rules of fairness. As such, they are also likely to open up controversies or conflicts of meaning between different principles of fairness and therefore of justification. The pragmatic approach examines how policies are justified and negotiated within various social and normative frameworks. This perspective allows considering the capacity of actors to adjust to different situations and contexts. Consequently, it elucidates the variability of policies based on different social and normative contexts. This approach seems to offer a relevant framework to understand the issues at stake in the practice of evaluation in a context of plurality. *On Justification: The Economies of Worth* (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) is one of the most powerful contemporary theoretical frameworks for understanding this process (chapter ► “[The Economies of Worth Model: Operating Principles and Ways to Apply It](#)”). This chapter aims to demonstrate this in three stages.

First, Sect. 2 briefly describes the underlying logic behind the transformation of the context in which public and social policies are implemented, along with its implications for the design and practice of evaluation. In Sect. 3, the theoretical framework of the economies of worth (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) is outlined to facilitate the understanding of multiple rationalities and registers of reference. In Sect. 4, this framework is applied heuristically to literacy policy in French-speaking Belgium, highlighting its value in evaluation.

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## 2 Public Policies and Evaluation in a Coordinating State

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, several developments transformed the state's role in society, shifting it from a grand organizer to a coordinator of multiple initiatives (Genard 2002). However, the welfare state was built on the principles of sectoral social assistance and beneficiary categorization, which fostered compartmentalized rationalities. Critics denounced this sectorization and the “fragmented vision of man” it promotes (Dartiguenave and Garnier 2003). The aim therefore was to understand the plurality of situations. This then leads to the territorialization of social service management in the hope of breaking away from the sectoral and categorical model by promoting the decompartmentalization of various social action sectors.

According to Hamzaoui, “[...] the ambition here is to break away from the sector-based and categorized approach itself, to get representatives of different public sectors to work together towards a common goal, aimed at social categories rooted in the territory to which they belong” (Hamzaoui 2002: 27; own translation). This desire to break down barriers has also been reflected in the trend toward networking and the growing call for partnerships in response to the necessity to approach people as a whole and in their environment, rather than as fragmented concerns. Simultaneously, social problems are becoming individualized, when the welfare state traditionally viewed them as structural, requiring structural solutions. Employment policies exemplify this trend. According to François Eymard-Duvernay, unemployment can certainly not be explained exclusively by a shortage of jobs, as it is based on “quality judgments” that are “at the root of labor selection,” hence “[...] the role of the company as a collective work, which integrates certain members and excludes others” (Eymard-Duvernay 2012a: 9; own translation). While unemployment is no longer seen by the agents in charge of managing it as a simple structural problem, employees and unemployed workers are not recognized as belonging to “the political community of work” (Eymard-Duvernay 2012a: 40; own translation). The evaluation of the unemployed then shifts to their skills and behavior, making them responsible for the situation (Jacob and Genard 2011). In so doing, unemployment management relies on a “judgment” that integrates “cognitive, ethical, social and political dimensions of quality” (Eymard-Duvernay 2012a: 11; own translation).

As a result, initiatives have proliferated in recent decades, particularly in employment but not only making the coordination of public interventions difficult (Jacob and Genard 2011). A coordinating state, often characterized by collaborative policymaking, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders, challenges the

traditional assumptions of the policy cycle framework. This one assumes a linear progression through distinct stages (agenda-setting, policy formulation and decision-making, implementation, evaluation, and termination). It suggests that policymakers move from one step to the next in a predictable sequence. For Werner Jann and Kai Wegrich, “[...] the policy cycle perspective has proven to provide an excellent heuristic device” [but it] “draws an extremely simplified picture of reality” (Jann and Wegrich 2007: 57), especially in a coordinating state where policy processes are often nonlinear and iterative. Policies can move back and forth between stages, with frequent revisiting of earlier stages as new information emerges or as stakeholders’ preferences shift. This complexity is difficult to capture with a linear framework. Collaborative governance models and public-private partnerships are common, and policies are often cocreated rather than dictated by a single governmental authority.

These developments have significant implications for the practice of evaluation. First, the evaluation process involves reducing complexity, meaning it requires a simplification of reality since it cannot capture all the factors influencing the evolution of a social situation. However, the goal of decompartmentalization generates multifactoriality and demands the development of increasingly sophisticated evaluation models, which are time-consuming to implement and also more fragile (Bas-Théron et al. 2005).

Second, the evaluation process generally relies on a principle of decontextualization, aiming to compare the performance of different policies or measures over time and space. This is particularly reinforced by the trend toward new public management and the objective of benchmarking, which allows the comparison of results obtained by different policies. This objective necessitates a stable and immutable evaluation tool, meaning it must consist of disembodied, that is, decontextualized, indicators to compare the effectiveness or efficiency of measures over time and space. Thus, indicators must be formalized *a priori* and applicable to all target groups and territories.

However, the trend toward decompartmentalization and territorialization is also based on the idea that contextual indicators are equally essential for interpreting results (Elbaum 2012), further complicating the evaluation process. Moreover, with diminishing singular rationality, each public policy is often multireferenced, with each reference framework having its own rationality and justification. For Eymard-Duvernay (2012b), it is also a question of arbitrating between several evaluation procedures, which constitute “evaluation tests.” These are always heterogeneous and uncertain cognitively, ethically, socially, and politically: “[...] cognitively (do we have the right information to measure the quality of work accurately?); ethically (is the evaluation made with reference to individual and collective values that are really worthwhile and will still be worthwhile in the future?); socially (is the definition of quality consistent with the coordination situation and the collective values that support it?); politically (are the evaluation rules legitimate? Do they lead to fair selection?)” (Eymard-Duvernay 2012b: 2; own translation).

Literacy policies in French-speaking Belgium, which will be elaborated upon in this article, are an emblematic example of the composite universe that evaluation must confront today (Fusulier and Laloy 2012). The analysis of this composite universe, so the plurality of rationalities and justifications, presupposes that evaluators are equipped

with a theoretical framework that enables them to make these rationalities explicit, that is, to understand their nature. In economics and sociology of conventions (in short EC/SC), there is a particularly well-developed and formalized framework that addresses some of the limitations of evaluation mentioned above: the theory of the economies of worth developed by the French sociologist, Luc Boltanski, and the French economist, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006). Aligned with the pragmatic turn, this theory shifts the focus from the study of policy critique to the study of the critique of policy (Zittoun 2014; Halpern et al. 2018; chapter ► [“TheEconomies of Worth Model: Operating Principles and Ways to Apply It”](#)). It considers the active role of actors in putting a social problem on the political agenda while critically examining the solutions found and the assumptions (“causal hypothesis” and “intervention hypothesis”) that underpin them (Knoepfel et al. 2011).

This approach has demonstrated its capacity to seriously consider the meanings actors give to their actions (chapter ► [“TheEconomies of Worth Model: Operating Principles and Ways to Apply It”](#)). This includes the recipients of social action, whose analysis of the reception of social action highlights risks of dissonance between the purpose of public action and the reality experienced by users. Such dissonance can lead to phenomena of “non-take-up of social rights” (Van Oorschot 1991) or “pseudorecourse” (Gräbener 2023: 87), which significantly impact the evaluation of public policies. Additionally, this theory captures the irreducible plurality of social problems and the mechanisms designed to resolve them. It is thus a scientific approach “[...] better suited to understanding complex phenomena, composite objects, and mixed-up realities” (chapter ► [“TheEconomies of Worth Model: Operating Principles and Ways to Apply It”](#)).

Furthermore, it avoids the illusion of institutional equivalence, which would allow comparisons of public policy effectiveness and efficiency over time and space in a “benchmark” logic. Instead, it reveals “[...] how such policy goals are multiple and historically contingent” (chapter ► [“Convention Theoryand Social Policy: Historical Perspectives”](#)) and that behind a single “blanket term,” such as literacy, there exists a multiplicity of practices. Different “labels” may cover similar practices.

In light of this theory, public policy—and, by extension, the evaluation of public policy—falls under a specific system of action related to a plural sense of justice. In other words, public policies must comply with principles of justice that make them credible and justifiable in the public arena. This system comprises different frames of reference or registers (terms used interchangeably in this paper) of justice. Each register has its own coherence, specific organization, and structuring principle of meaning.

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### 3 The Economies of Worth Model as a Theoretical Tool

The theory of the economies of worth initially emerged from the sociology of disputes. Focusing on the professional category of managerial staff, Boltanski studied the stories of company executives who recounted accidents in their careers and claimed to be victims of injustice. He asked what conditions must be met for a public denunciation of injustice to be considered admissible. Conversely, why are

certain cases deemed abnormal and inadmissible? Boltanski observed that “[...] a denunciation of injustice appears abnormal when the various actants occupy different positions on the singular-general axis” (Boltanski 2012: 11). As a result, when faced with a judge who is “large” by virtue of his status (speaking on behalf of the common good translated into law), a complainant who remains attached to his or her singularity makes his or her denunciation appear abnormal. In other words, cases “[...] whose presentation remained in the order of the singular – that is, those that were not taken up by an agency whose collective character could be credibly defended and thus were not desingularized – appear abnormal” (Boltanski 2012: 11).

However, Boltanski notes that there is no single singular/general axis. In other words, what is singular in one context can be general in another. For example, it is easy to imagine that a judge who behaved at a family gathering in the same way as when presiding over a court hearing would be described as indecent. His or her coldness, impersonality, and distance, which contribute to his or her “greatness” in a court of law, would become a “misery” in situations where human warmth, authenticity, and closeness are expected.

This tension became the subject of considerable public debate in Belgium in the 1990s when an investigating judge attended a meal organized by relatives of young girls who had been victims of a pedophile. On one hand, a large section of the population supported the judge’s attitude, advocating for compassionate justice with a human face. On the other hand, some denounced the judge’s professional misconduct for exceeding his duty of neutrality. Ultimately, the judge was removed from the case. This situation illustrates the existence of conflicting registers of justice that need to be clarified.

The purpose of the economies of worth model is to identify these registers of justice and the “grammar” on which the actions of the players are based when they justify a criticism, justify themselves, or reach an agreement. This grammar is common to all actors, endowing them with a “metaphysical capacity,” a critical competence that enables them to transcend their contingency and engage in a legal debate that mobilizes principles of equivalence. In other words, when actors want to justify their position and their representation of what is right and good, they invoke general principles that refer to a conception of the common good. The actor ceases to defend his or her particular case, supporting arguments with a general scope valid in all similar cases. However, there are different ways of looking at the common good, and each corresponds to a higher principle and, therefore, a register of the sense of justice.

Without claiming to be exhaustive, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) identified, based on major Western philosophical works, the existence of six common higher principles to which individuals can resort to justify their positions, reach agreements, or engage in controversies. Two additional worlds have subsequently been formalized: the “connectionist” world, where continuous networking and project engagement become a higher principle in themselves (Boltanski and Chiapello 2018), and the “green” world, which incorporates nature into the community of living beings (not merely a common humanity) (Lafaye and Thévenot 2017). However, this discussion will focus on the six initial common worlds and their register of justice. Each common higher principle corresponds to a “common world” where it is tested

against reality. The authors define these worlds using 13 categories (chapter ► [“TheEconomies of Worth Model: Operating Principles and Ways to Apply It”](#)), of which only 8 will be discussed here, as they are considered the most significant:

1. The higher common principle: Guarantees the common good.
2. The superior entity: The harmonious figure that embodies this superior principle.
3. The state of worthiness: Great beings who are the guarantors of the higher common principle, serving as reference points and helping coordinate the actions of others.
4. The state of unworthiness: Characteristics in each world that distance from the state of greatness and from the guarantee of the higher common principle.
5. The investment formula: Designates the cost associated with access to the state of greatness.
6. The reality test: Enables access to the state of greatness.
7. The objects and devices: Help to objectify magnitude.
8. The subjects: Types of individuals likely to access the state of greatness.

Based on the definition of these criteria, the authors model six common worlds, characterized by different higher principles, a variable definition of what qualifies as great and small, and what needs to be invested to reach the state of greatness. It is important to note that the term “greatness” does not imply a value judgment. Instead, the differential in greatness (the state of being great or small) within a world simply characterizes a relative position in reference to a common higher principle. Each of these worlds is briefly summarized below, with some interpretation of the theoretical framework.

### 3.1 The Civic World

In the civic world, the higher principle is the equality of all. This world emphasizes the collective, the representation of the collective, and collective consciousness. Acts and decisions made in accordance with this principle grant access to the state of greatness. Valued attitudes include exercising civic rights, participating in activities that promote greater equality, renouncing personal interests, demonstrating selflessness, and uniting for collective action against inequality. In the civic world, the common good is guaranteed when everyone participates on behalf of the society and defends the rights of the whole rather than their own particular interests.

The “little person” is one who is discriminated against or a victim of inequality. The key to achieving greatness in this world is through engaging in collective action and participating in civic life. Conversely, developing an individualistic attitude (every man for himself) risks becoming a figure of misery in the civic world. Valued figures include citizens, delegates, and representatives.

The subject of the civic world prioritizes social progress, understood as progress toward greater equality, above all other considerations.

### **3.2 The Market World**

The market world stands in opposition to the civic world, as it is action in pursuit of self-interest that contributes to the common good by liberating egoism to produce wealth. In this context, competition is the higher principle, serving as the mechanism that ensures the common good. The market, where competitiveness is paramount, represents the superior entity in the market world.

In this world, greatness is achieved by being opportunistic and winning in a competitive environment, thus gaining access to the material or symbolic goods coveted by the majority. Possessing the objects and attributes desired by others signifies greatness. Conversely, anyone who loses in this competitive game is considered small. The investment required to achieve greatness involves continually striving to remain competitive and increase one's market value. A person who does not compete is seen as a defeatist, cultivating passivity.

Figures such as the entrepreneur, customer, salesman, and competitor populate the market world. The subject of the market world must assert himself in competition and accept being judged on an equal footing with other competitors to determine his greatness.

### **3.3 The Industrial World**

The industrial world is governed by the principles of efficiency, functionality, and the instrumental rationality of actions. Greatness in this world is characterized by what is efficient, competent, and operational within the division of labor and the system. The greats are the experts and specialists who possess the techniques and skills that ensure functional effectiveness. A hierarchy is established between those who have mastered this knowledge and skills and those who have yet to acquire them.

To grow in this world, individuals must undergo training and pass tests to certify the acquisition of new skills. Anyone who does not train and develop skills is considered incapable in the industrial world. Learners, technicians, students, and scientists are examples of valued figures in this world.

The subject of the industrial world values learning and progress in technical and scientific knowledge.

### **3.4 The Domestic World**

The domestic world is based on the higher principle of duty toward a community to ensure its reproduction, emphasizing the primacy of relationships (a universe of interacquaintance and trust). It relies on respect for traditions and shared values, fostering a sense of belonging and familiarity. This world also features a harmony of hierarchy, establishing an order among beings that defines the state of greatness and smallness.

In this world, greatness is embodied by those who represent the community and show loyalty to it, while smallness is attributed to those not yet integrated, such as children or foreigners. The state of greatness is reached by integrating and respecting the common rules and traditions characteristic of the community, ensuring its continuity. Anyone who does not respect these principles is considered a traitor. The figures of the member, the charismatic leader, the friend, and the colleague are central in the domestic world.

The subject of the domestic world identifies with a community and works to perpetuate it. They prioritize relationships with their fellow human beings, being mindful of their honor and their duties toward them.

### 3.5 The World of Inspiration

In the world of inspiration, the higher principle values the singularity of both the subject and the object, emphasizing creativity and authenticity. Greatness is achieved by those who succeed in producing original work, while those who lack inspiration and creative drive are considered small. Conformity is depreciated in this world.

Growth can be achieved through asceticism, introspection, and the relentless quest for uniqueness. However, nothing is more despised than someone who claims to be original and inspired when they have merely copied others' work; such a person is considered wretched in this world. Conversely, the figure of the artist represents a state of greatness. The devices that support the development of inspiration are characteristic of this world.

The subject of the inspired world feels a need to surpass themselves, seeking within to find the resources that will enable them to reveal the genius that lies dormant within.

### 3.6 The World of Fame

In the world of fame, the higher principle is fame. Recognition, regardless of its content, is paramount. While the "little guy" remains in the shadows, the "big guy" is visible and known, using all necessary devices and artifacts to achieve this. However, this visibility comes at a cost, as the prominent individual is constantly exposed to the opinions of others and lives through the gaze cast upon them. In this world, someone who seeks to remain secret and invisible is considered wretched.

The subject of the world of opinion is in constant tension, striving to ensure their fame and secure an audience (Table 1).

In reality, these different worlds can coexist, juxtapose, come into tension, or compromise with each other. Compromise does not mean choosing one world to the exclusion of the others. Rather, a compromise is primarily the avoidance of conflict, even if it maintains the composite nature of the convention. As Boltanski and Thévenot put it: "In a compromise, people agree to come to terms, that is, to suspend a clash – a dispute involving more than one world – without settling it through

**Table 1** Simplified indicators of worlds

|                               | Civic                                             | Domestic                                | Industrial                   | Market            | Inspired                | Fame                        |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Higher principle              | Equality                                          | Duty/loyalty                            | Efficiency                   | Competition       | Authenticity            | Fame                        |
| State of greatness            | The one who represents the collective             | The one who embodies the community      | The one who knows            | The one who wins  | The one who is inspired | The one who is famous       |
| Characteristic of “the great” | Collective commitment/defense of the rule of law  | Compassion/loyalty                      | Expertise/mastery            | Opportunism       | Creativity              | Visibility                  |
| State of smallness            | The one who is discriminated against (inequality) | The one who is not yet fully integrated | The one who is not competent | The one who loses | The one who conforms    | The one who remains unknown |
| Potential of greatness        | Getting involved in collective action             | Embracing community rules and values    | Training                     | Competing         | Creating                | Gaining recognition         |
| Figure of the wretch          | The individualist                                 | The traitor                             | The incompetent              | The loser         | The imitator            | The secret being            |
| An example of “a great”       | Ghandi                                            | Queen Elisabeth                         | Marie Curie                  | Warren Buffett    | Vincent van Gogh        | Kim Kardashian              |

recourse to a test in just one of the worlds. The situation remains composite, but a clash is averted” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006: 277).

The common worlds can also be mobilized according to circumstances and situations. For example, a university may decide to award an honorary doctorate by expressing its relationship with the market world (a businessman is honored), the inspired world (an artist), the industrial world (a highly specialized scientist), the world of opinion (a fashionable star), the civic world (an assertive democrat), or the domestic world (a charismatic figure within a community). Each honorary doctorate could, however, be the subject of controversy among proponents of the different worlds within the university. While the university is primarily an assertive entity of the industrial world (a temple of science), its nature is composite because it is marked by a plurality of principles of meaning.

Nevertheless, some principles are more assertive than others, and compromises can be found such as patient and solid scientific research (the industrial world) leading to an extraordinary invention (the inspired world), which is then marketed to make a profit (the market world). However, the risk of a contradiction between principles and actions remains. In other words, the registers of justice clash and combine in the public arena. The choices made in terms of evaluation are not neutral in this respect, and it is crucial to at least be aware of the different worlds involved.

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## **4 Literacy as an Example of a Heterogeneous Public Policy**

Public policies tend to become more complex and composite. Assessing them, therefore, requires an understanding of the different rationalities and registers of justice that constitute them. The economies of worth model is a powerful tool in this respect. To illustrate the relevance of the economics and sociology of conventions to the practice of evaluation, this model will be applied to literacy policies.

### **4.1 The Politics of Literacy in Belgium**

A public policy is generally a complex and composite system, not only in terms of its rules and regulations but also in terms of its objectives, implementation, and impact. Consider the example of literacy in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. Most aspects of literacy work are multifaceted. It is implemented through a variety of actions with different objectives, relies on budgets from diverse sources, and targets a variety of audiences.

Grasping the full scope of literacy policies is even more challenging because the legislative frameworks governing them are broader in scope than literacy alone, addressing issues such as socioprofessional integration, lifelong learning, and social cohesion. The field of literacy clearly exhibits, in terms of its institutional anchoring and implementation, all the characteristics of a “plural” social space that is difficult to define.

The transformation of the State's role, the individualization of social problems, and the peculiarities of Belgium's institutional structure can partly explain the diversity of these systems. However, this diversity can also be understood in terms of the very nature of the literacy issue. As Bernard Lahire points out, "[...] writing and reading practices are not limited to a few well-defined situations but are almost coextensive with all social practices" (Lahire 2006: 35; own translation). Furthermore, the target audience for literacy initiatives is far from homogeneous. The individuals engaged in learning processes where literacy is an objective vary widely in terms of age, gender, social origin, cultural background, employment status, level of education, and more. Consequently, their expectations and the impact of literacy on their daily lives also vary greatly. Beyond the primary goal of acquiring language skills, many other interrelated objectives come into play.

This reinforces the idea that literacy and its assessment cannot be limited solely to the acquisition of standardized lexical and scriptural skills; instead, they must take into account learners' individual needs and backgrounds. This is one of the foundations of andragogy, which defines itself as considering the "[...] needs of adults when planning and evaluating their instruction [and recognizes that] adults are mostly interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact on their job or personal life" (Machynska and Boiko 2020: 25).

The diverse potential impacts of literacy justify its inclusion in numerous regulatory schemes as a tool for achieving broader objectives. This diversity also explains why literacy operators often adopt a holistic approach to the problem, developing actions beyond training per se. From the outset, literacy training has been part of broader efforts to combat social inequalities and is central to initiatives aimed at reducing the social divide related to civic rights, freedom of movement and opinion, cultural development, and more. This explains why literacy can be found in mechanisms with different objectives.

The very intention of standardized assessment (through entry and exit tests) is inherently controversial, as it presupposes smoothing out the plurality of individual realities and assessing them through a uniform test. This mirrors the tensions observed by Ove Skarpenes and Kari-Mette Walmann Hidle (2024) in the field of basic education in Norway, where there is a conflict between individualization in pedagogical support for students and the standardization of tests used to assess their performance.

In French-speaking Belgium, the cooperation agreement on the development of concerted adult literacy policies in 2005 and the establishment of the steering committee on adult literacy as a forum for coordination and consultation align with the trend toward decompartmentalization. This initiative encourages dialog between various policies and sectors developing literacy initiatives to overcome the tendency to pile up schemes and develop better-coordinated literacy policies. Similarly, the Observatoire de l'Alphabétisation et du Français Langue Étrangère (Literacy and French as a Foreign Language Observatory) was established in 2022 to formulate policy recommendations aimed at improving existing systems.

## 4.2 Literacy Between Several Worlds

Analyzing the sectors, decrees, and agreements that provide the framework for literacy initiatives in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation reveals that the registers mobilized fall under five different worlds according to the theory of the economies of worth. These can be expressed as follows:

- Literacy to promote equality and civic participation (civic world)
- Literacy to promote access to the labor market and competitiveness (market world)
- Literacy as a means of mastering the knowledge and skills needed to move up the skills ladder (industrial world)
- Literacy to integrate into the host community (domestic world)
- Literacy to develop self-esteem (inspired world)

Each of these worlds provides a unique context for understanding the significance of literacy.

### 4.2.1 Literacy in the Civic World

In the civic sphere, without a command of spoken and written language, illiterate individuals cannot fully participate as citizens or speak out about the inequalities they see or experience. Consequently, they risk marginalization or retreating into their own communities (community withdrawal). They are also less equipped to defend their rights as citizens and to advocate for equality. To develop collective awareness, defend collective rights, and engage in political action, access to the language and communication codes used in society is essential. Knowing how to read and write is fundamental for participating in society and exercising citizenship.

Illiteracy is both a stigma and a danger in the civic world. Literacy for all is a prerequisite for civic engagement and the revitalization of democracy, which is essential for contributing to the common good in the civic world. Without proficiency in oral and written language, it is more challenging to develop a critical view of society and inequalities, participate in social progress, and assert civic rights. Literacy programs should primarily enable individuals to develop a sense of civic responsibility and a critical view of their social environment.

### 4.2.2 Literacy in the Market World

In the market world, an illiterate person is not considered “great” because they lack the basic tools to assert their interests in the marketplace and compete with others who also seek to defend their interests. They risk becoming dependent on others, hindering their ability to achieve their desires. In a society based on consumption and the possession of goods, one of the best ways to access these coveted objects is through employment, which ensures economic independence. Mastery of written and spoken language is essential for participating in the “struggle for position” (De Gaulejac and Taboada-Leonetti 1994) and competing in the labor market.

Literacy is viewed as a means to make learners more competitive. A literate person is more valuable in the market than someone who is not. Literacy training should primarily enable individuals to compete with others, translating into better positioning in the job market.

#### **4.2.3 Literacy in the Industrial World**

In the industrial world, illiterate individuals are considered “small” because they cannot access the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective and efficient within the functional division of labor. Mastery of written and spoken language is a prerequisite for developing other types of skills and qualifications required for a role in the division of labor. Essentially, it forms the foundation for training and learning the skills needed to effectively master the environment.

Illiterate individuals need assistance in building a foundation of basic language skills, from which they can progress in their mastery of knowledge and skills, thereby increasing their effectiveness. It is important to classify individuals according to their level of proficiency in written and spoken language (using scientifically and rigorously established principles) and develop actions to enable them to advance, thereby becoming more effective. Participation in society in this context is not civic or competitive but functional, defined by the role the individual can play in the division of labor.

Mastery of skills is certified by diplomas that attest to the successful completion of tests. Literacy initiatives must be efficient and directly target the certified skills needed to master written and spoken language, as well as other basic skills.

#### **4.2.4 Literacy in the Domestic World**

In the domestic world, illiterate individuals cannot achieve the status of “great” because they have not mastered one of the fundamental traditions and rules of the group they are supposed to belong to or integrate into: the codes of language. Language, with its grammatical rules and vocabulary, is a key element governing integration into a community or nation. Without this mastery, it is difficult for them to access the values, traditions, and standards that guide actions in the domestic world. They are also less able to develop a sense of belonging to the group or respect the hierarchy of rules because they may not understand them.

Literacy is therefore a first step toward learning the rules and traditions of the community, enabling individuals to develop an attitude that conforms to its requirements. It helps people adapt to the world in which they live and respect its rules. Knowing the community’s codes is essential to fitting in, developing a sense of belonging and loyalty, and benefiting from the solidarity linked to community relations. Priority is given to union, to what brings people together, and to what is common.

In the domestic world, the “great” person is the one who embodies the community and is dedicated to it. Literacy initiatives must first and foremost enable individuals to grow by securing their place within the community through a sufficient command of its language.

#### **4.2.5 Literacy in the World of Inspiration**

In the inspired sphere, mastery of written and spoken language, along with the communication possibilities it affords, is essential for personal development and fulfilment, as well as for the development of self-esteem. This is closely tied to the importance of writing and reading in Western societies. Oral and written communications, along with other forms of expression, are vital for expressing individuality and one's relationship with the world. Without a sufficient command of language, individuals' risk being unable to express their creativity and inspiration, even if they have the potential to do so within themselves. Illiterate individuals may experience a weakened identity, leading them to imitate what they see around them.

Literacy training thus contributes to identity-building not only through the acquisition of lexical skills but also through their application in cultural and artistic activities. This approach encourages the restoration of a positive identity, a sense of progress in life, personal fulfilment, self-expression, and self-confidence. It fosters confidence in one's abilities and promotes a sense of moving forward in life.

### **4.3 Evaluating Literacy Policy**

Literacy, in terms of the economies of worth model, involves fostering the learner's growth during the training process. Evaluation, therefore, involves measuring the difference in magnitude between a learner's entry into and exit from a literacy program. However, as each magnitude corresponds to a different world, the assessment criteria vary accordingly.

In the industrial world, greatness is achieved through the acquisition of skills that enable progress in mastering written and spoken language, as well as other basic competencies. Indicators used to assess progress in the industrial world aim to measure linguistic and technical skills. The goal of the assessment is to situate the individual concerning their degree of mastery of these clearly identified and formalized skills. These indicators are particularly easy to manipulate because they are objective and measurable. Examples include knowledge tests at entry and exit and certification of the learner's ability to follow a course at a higher level.

In the inspired common world, the overriding principle is creativity. A "great" person is one who can express their imagination and "inspiration." This world includes artists and individuals who can detach from material aspects of life. The common higher principle here is the ability to express one's inspiration, creativity, personality, and authenticity. Indicators used to assess progress in the inspired world are often more subjective, such as feelings of progress in life, identity transformation, personal fulfilment, self-expression, and self-confidence.

In the market world, greatness is achieved by increasing an individual's ability to compete, particularly in the job market. The closer an individual is to an advantageous position in the job market, the more positive their assessment will be in terms of the goals of the market world. Evaluation in the market world can be based on quantitative and measurable indicators, such as the increase in the activity rate or employment rate of a population following literacy training. Other indicators might include the number of job interviews attended, the number of job applications sent, commitment to a

vocational training course, and subjective indicators like “I feel more confident in my job search” or “I have more desire to look for a job than before.”

In the civic world, greatness translates into an individual’s affirmation of their role as a citizen and their ability to defend their rights and fight for equality. An individual who, thanks to literacy, is able to develop a critical mind, defend his or her rights and those of the community, and get involved in a civic project is an individual who is growing in terms of the principle at work in the civic world. In this case, the evaluation does not focus so much on mastery of the oral and written language but on the development of the individual’s ability to play a part in social progress and the defense of civic and collective rights. Indicators relating to the civic world will focus on individuals’ civic participation. Objective indicators could measure the degree of participation or commitment of individuals in cultural or civic projects. Subjective indicators could assess the feeling of being able to defend one’s rights, of being aware of the problems of the society, of taking part in a collective movement, etc.

In the domestic world, the work on size is achieved through the acquisition and knowledge of the institutions, norms and values, and traditions of the society (as a nation) in which one lives. It is also the sense of belonging, the degree of integration into society, and the understanding of the rules that govern that society that testify to an individual’s state of greatness in the domestic world. Evaluation will therefore focus on these aspects of social integration, knowledge of the country’s institutions, and understanding of how they work. This dimension can be assessed through objective factors such as the ability to cope with a request from an institution, breaking out of isolation and strengthening social ties, etc. More subjective criteria can also be considered, such as “I feel part of the society in which I live,” “I feel more at ease in my relationships with others,” etc. (Table 2).

**Table 2** Literacy in the different worlds

|            | Goals                                                                                                                                                              | Indicators                                                                                                                                                               |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Industrial | Progressing through a qualification process                                                                                                                        | Entry and exit testing of language skills, access to prequalifying or qualifying higher education, etc.                                                                  |
| Inspired   | Ensuring personal development                                                                                                                                      | Subjective perception of personal development, confidence and self-esteem scales, etc.                                                                                   |
| Market     | Increasing one’s ability to compete in the job market                                                                                                              | Access to employment, definition of a professional project, steps taken in the integration process (CV, covering letter, job interview), etc.                            |
| Civic      | Develop the ability to participate as a citizen, to contribute to social progress, and to defend civic and collective rights                                       | The degree of involvement in civic, cultural, and political projects, the feeling of being able to defend one’s rights, having an opinion on certain social issues, etc. |
| Domestic   | Improve knowledge of institutions, norms and values, and social traditions, to better integrate into society (including family members and children in particular) | Knowledge and understanding of institutions, breaking out of isolation, access to culture, etc.                                                                          |

It is evident that evaluating literacy policy in unequivocal terms is impossible. The plurality of worlds and, consequently, the registers of justice involved and their combination inevitably require a multifaceted evaluation approach. Tensions between different registers are omnipresent within organizations, particularly because many fall under multiple decrees and sectors with varying relative weights in the registers of justice, influenced by funding criteria.

An organization involved in social and professional integration, lifelong learning, and social action may find itself subject to a highly complex system of justification and evaluation. On one hand, it is expected to respond to a market rationale by promoting training aimed at a return to employment, while on the other hand, it is asked to promote a civic rationale of social emancipation and simultaneously ensure a domestic rationale of social integration. There is also a classic tension between the individualization of education in the inspired world and the standardization of assessments in the industrial world (Skarpenes and Walmann Hidle 2024).

However, each rationale has its own relevance, and the diversity of literacy initiatives can be seen as an asset for a public policy that aims to cover a wide range of learner needs and the objectives pursued by providers. In this regard, evaluating a composite public policy such as literacy could function as a roadmap, capturing the full spectrum of impacts and needs that the policy can address.

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## 5 Conclusion

Public policies are complex and composite social processes, particularly because they combine multiple registers of justification, especially in a context where the limitations of sectoral regulation are recognized and criticized in favor of a transversal and multidimensional approach. Consequently, evaluation is questioned regarding its capacity to apprehend the registers mobilized in public action. It is not a purely technical act, stemming from a single rationality; it is itself embedded in common worlds that give it meaning and form through a plurality of rationalities. The economies of worth model, as presented, is thus an operational theoretical tool for considering the adequacy of evaluation to the logics of policy formulation and implementation, hence to the different conceptions of worth involved.

Using the example of adult literacy in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (French-speaking Belgium), the geography of common worlds and the different conceptions of worth characterizing them were delineated. This theoretical moment appears essential for constructing a just and precise evaluation framework. By clarifying and formalizing the diversity of issues and actions, it avoids the fiction of having a simple measure for a complex situation. It prompts reflection in terms of combining registers of meaning and variable geometry evaluation. In doing so, it reintroduces politics and ethics (in reference to the cities and common goods that define the engaged principles of justice), hence potential controversy, into the evaluation process since the approach does not prioritize the conceptions of worth in tension or interference. The hierarchy is political, and the weight given to each conception of

worth, from which an evaluation technique can be designed and applied, must itself be justified and agreed upon.

Economics and sociology of conventions is a highly relevant framework for constructing an evaluation system for public policies because it provides a nuanced understanding of the multiple modes of normativity, the context-specific nature of evaluations, and the need for compromise between competing goals. It helps evaluators consider not only the technical outcomes of policies but also their social legitimacy, the diversity of stakeholder perspectives, and the dynamic nature of policymaking. The economics and sociology of conventions supports a dynamic approach to evaluation, where criteria can be updated as the policy context evolves. This is particularly important for policies that need to be flexible and responsive to changing circumstances in a coordinating state operating in a world of uncertainty.

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## 6 Cross-References

- ▶ [Convention Theory and Social Policy: Historical Perspectives](#)
- ▶ [Legal Norms and Convention Theory: Justification, Evaluation, and Realization of Law](#)
- ▶ [The Economies of Worth Model: Operating Principles and Ways to Apply It](#)
- ▶ [The Pragmatic and Democratic Approach to State as a Convention Between Persons](#)

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