A diagnostic framework for robust and micro-calibrated policy design

An introduction for policy practitioners

ANZSOG Australia & New Zealand School Of Government

Adapted from: *A diagnostic framework for robust and micro-calibrated policy design: Connecting the robustness of policy to the design choices that produce it* by Professor Giliberto Capano, University of Bologna and 2026 ANZSOG Academic Fellow.

Defining micro-calibrated policy design

The diagnostic framework for robust and micro-calibrated policy design connects micro-design of policy instruments with the concept of policy robustness.

Micro-calibrated policy design focuses on the detailed design features embedded within policy instruments. These design choices influence how policy operates in practice and shape its capacity to achieve intended outcomes under different conditions.

Policy robustness refers to a policy's ability to continue achieving its objectives across changing, uncertain or unpredictable conditions. Rather than viewing robustness as a characteristic that emerges only after implementation, the framework starts from a different proposition: robustness is produced, or undermined, by the specific design choices embedded within policy instruments.

Why micro-calibrated policy design matters

Governments increasingly design and implement policy in environments characterised by uncertainty, complexity and change. Economic conditions shift, technologies evolve, public expectations change, and implementation often relies on networks of organisations operating across multiple levels of government and sectors.

Policymakers face an important challenge: how can they assess whether a policy is likely to remain effective when conditions change?

Traditional assessments of policy performance often focus on outcomes after implementation. This diagnostic framework offers a complementary perspective by examining the design characteristics that may strengthen or weaken a policy's capacity to operate effectively across different circumstances.

Understanding these design features can help policymakers identify potential weaknesses, or 'fragilities', before they become implementation problems and support more informed decisions about policy design, review and adaptation.

What the framework helps practitioners do

The framework provides a structured way to assess how the micro-design characteristics of policy instruments contribute to policy robustness. It supports:

- analysis of the robustness implications of policy design choices
- identification of potential strengths and fragilities within policy instruments
- understanding of how different micro-design dimensions interact to influence robustness
- distinguishing between weaknesses that arise from policy design and those that reflect broader institutional conditions
- policy review, challenge and improvement processes.

Importantly, the framework does not reduce robustness to a single score or judgement. Instead, it generates a robustness profile that highlights where potential vulnerabilities exist and what type of response may be required.

When to use the framework

The framework can be applied at different points in the policy cycle, including:

- during policy development and design
- when reviewing or refining existing policies
- as part of internal challenge, assurance or quality review processes
- when assessing whether a policy can adapt to changing conditions
- when exploring whether observed weaknesses stem from policy design or institutional factors.

The framework is intended as a diagnostic tool. It supports systematic analysis of policy design and provides a structured basis for discussing how robustness may be strengthened.

An overview of the framework is presented below. To access more in-depth explanation and examples of the framework in practice, access the full publication on ANZOG's website by scanning the QR code.

Diagnostic framework for robust and micro-calibrated policy design

Map instruments

List the instruments that make up the policy.

Score the design detail

Score each instrument against the ten micro-design dimensions.

Read the robustness profile

Identify robust, fragile or mixed dimensions.

Act on fragilities

Decide whether the response is redesign, further evidence or institutional strengthening.

The ten micro-design dimensions

Target specifications (goals):

1. Target population
2. Expected outcome
3. Timeframe

Calibrations (means):

4. Primary recipients
5. Additional resources
6. Organisation in charge
7. Intrusiveness*
8. Implementer discretion*
9. Accountability rules
10. Monitoring and auditing

* Intrusiveness' and 'Implementer discretion' are scored for level, not quality. Higher scores are not necessarily better.

Interpreting the findings of the robustness profile

The robustness profile distinguishes between design and institutional sources of robustness:

- **Design-determined:** The design provides a strong diagnosis. If fragile, redesign is usually the appropriate response.
- **Design-shaped:** The design provides a provisional signal. Confirm with institutional facts, then revise or strengthen implementation.
- **Institution-dependent**: The design provides only a weak signal. Assessment should focus on institutional capacity, authority, resources or coordination.