The Challenge of Path Dependency and the Need for Anticipatory Governance

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Path dependence describes a situation in which initial conditions establish a trajectory, making changes or reversal increasingly difficult. Although path dependence is often perceived as having negative consequences, it can also contribute to helpful trajectories. Research on path dependence is critical for understanding how institutions can be adapted to address global change, both in the sense of understanding why change is so difficult in some situations—and what can be done about it—and understanding how negative trajectories can be avoided. This paper will explore how the existence of path dependent processes increases considerably the need for anticipatory governance. It will analyze a few historical examples to demonstrate how early and broad assessment of technologies and situations can help promote more beneficial path dependence.