



COURSE MANUAL

E7: Policy Analysis and Implementation

Module 3 - Information and Policy Analysis

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Module 3

Introduction

The purpose of Module Three is to introduce you to the use of information in the policy-making process and provide you with some understanding of the concept of policy agenda-setting. The following topics will be discussed:

- The need for simple methods of policy analysis and planning
- Locating relevant sources
- Gaining access to the policy agenda and engaging assistance
- Acquiring and using leverage
- Protecting credibility

By the end of this module you should be able to:



Outcomes

- *justify* the need for policy analysis and planning.
- *identify* the different information sources and methods for issue search.
- *describe* the roles of different groups and their access to the policy agenda.
- *analyse* authentic case studies in light of the information presented in this module.

The need for simple methods of policy analysis and planning

The use of models

In Module One – Foundation of Policy Analysis, you:

- considered the value of models for understanding policy analysis and planning.
- were introduced briefly to the ideas of Graham Allison (1971) who argues that we all carry “bundles of assumptions” and “basic frames of reference” through which we view the world and try to make sense of it. The basic idea was that we all need to organise the information around us to understand events and therefore we seek out patterns to help our understanding. In this way, we tend to create a reality rather than observe one. As such, everyone is subject to using theories and models. In the context of decision-making and policy analysis, this applies to academics and politicians as much as anyone else.



- identified three different types of models:
 1. ideal type rational models;
 2. descriptive models; and
 3. normative models.
- In addition, Module One discussed the rational and incremental approaches to policy analysis.

The following section will look at the limitations of these concepts, which ultimately indicate the need for additional research and development of policy analysis and planning methods.

Limitations of ideal type models of rational policy-making

Ideal type models explore *ideas* rather than *ideals*. One reason for this type of analysis is to improve our understanding of the real world by examining how reality deviates from the ideal type model. Ideal type models also serve a prescriptive purpose, in that once we develop a model, we can evaluate whether we should try to approximate it in real life.

The most common criticism of rational decision-making models is that they are unrealistic or impractical. However, with respect to ideal type models, this should not be relevant, since ideal type models are not required to be representations of reality, nor do they act as a plan of action. Nonetheless, the assumption of perfect knowledge inherent in the rational approach is difficult for most people to accept. This doubt raises the question whether the rational process for policy-making alone is sufficient, or if it is necessary to ensure that a rational outcome occurs as well.

Another, related criticism is that while a decision-maker may have full knowledge of an existing issue, he or she should not be expected to have perfect knowledge about how the situation will play out in the future. External factors may result in unpredictable and unanticipated events, which make the analysis of consequences difficult.

However, the main problem with the rationality model is the role that values play. In the analysis of options and consequences as called for in the rational approach, the assignment of values may appear arbitrary. In contrast, ideal type models only provide the procedures for making decisions but do nothing to ensure the validity or desirability of the values fed into the process.

Prescriptive models derived from ideal type rationality models also cannot be presented as a complete alternative to political mechanisms for determining priorities and values. This is because the model does not create values and priorities; they are required inputs to the model. The other problem related to values is the question of whose values should prevail. According to Hogwood and Gunn (1984), a truly rational policy would be based upon the largest relevant scale of values and interests. However, how to accomplish this will need to be determined.

Limitations of descriptive models

Descriptive models help sort out, shape, or pattern the real world around us in order to increase understanding of it. The problem is, we don't all see the same reality. This becomes problematic when describing and explaining the policy-making process. Different conceptual lenses will yield different interpretations of events.

Hogwood and Gunn provide a summary of categories of the limitations of descriptive models as identified by Simon and Lindblom.

- **Psychological limitations** – There are limits to the cognitive and calculative abilities of individuals, and the ability to consistently achieve comprehensive rationality.
- **Limitations arising from multiple values** – The move from individual values to collective values also exacerbates the problem. According to the impossibility theorem put forward by Arrow, if everyone was able to weigh values differently, based on his or her personal assumptions, no meaningful aggregate value could be determined. Essentially, there is no rational way to resolve conflicts of interest.
- **Organisational limitations** – Policy-makers must work within organisations. The specialisation of functions may lead to an inability to see the whole picture and thus less-than-perfect efforts. Also, problems are viewed through narrower departmental, or sub-unit perspectives, which once again fail to consider the whole problem and the overall system requirements.
- **Cost limitations** – It costs resources, such as time, money and energy, to be fully rational. The benefits of the rational approach would have to merit the expenses taken to apply it. If the benefits did not exceed the costs and full rationality was still applied, that would actually constitute irrational behaviour!
- **Situational limitations** – Policy-makers do not make decisions in vacuums. There are perceptions of the past, interests in the present and expectations for the future that limit the options or actions that a policy-maker may want to take.

In his analysis of the descriptive model, Lindblom also demonstrates why fully rational policy-making is impossible by examining what actually occurs in real life policy-making. He suggests that in real life, the following occurs.

1. Policy-makers do not think through objectives in detail and thus save themselves from being held accountable to any specifics.
2. When existing policies are failing, remedial action by legislators or administrators is incremental, as opposed to sweeping in change.
3. Policy-makers accept that problems are rarely solved once and for all. Rather, they see policy-making as a serial process, where



improvements are made and mistakes corrected as solutions are developed.

4. Decisions are rarely made by individuals or single agencies; rather they are made by the interaction of various players in the policy community or network.
5. Actors may be self-interested, but are able to adjust to one another through bargaining, negotiation and compromise.
6. There is value placed on consensus in democratic, pluralistic societies and, as such, policies may be developed that are not the best, but instead achieve general consensus.

Limitations of incrementalism

Dror (1968) proposes meta-policy-making – that is, setting the framework for deciding how to decide as part of the solution to the problem of rationality in both prescriptive and descriptive models. He emphasises the costliness of pure rationality, indicating it should only be applied where there is marginal benefit in output.

He also provides analysis of three situations where the incrementalist approach would also be inadequate.

1. When present policies are so unsatisfactory that trying to adjust them is pointless.
2. When the problems themselves and the responses expected by government are changing quickly and, as such, the past does not provide as strong a basis for action.
3. The ability of policy-makers to problem-solve is expanding through knowledge, skill and technology. By basing decisions on the past, these opportunities are likely to be neglected, leading to potentially sub-optimal results.

Dror also criticises the aspect of consensus as described by Lindblom's incrementalist approach in that, while acceptable as a criterion of good policy some of the time, it is not applicable all the time. In particular, in situations where change is rapid, previous lessons that informed consensus are no longer applicable. As well, Dror questions the role of consensus with respect to complex, technical problems, arguing that it is often unnecessary in this area.

In the preceding section you looked at the limitations of the types of models and the rational and incremental approaches to policy analysis that were discussed in Module One. As you can see, this review indicates the need for additional research and development of policy analysis and planning methods.

The case for and against more active issue search

Need to anticipate problems and opportunities

Often, governments may become aware of a problem or its impact too late to provide optimal solutions. The best way to treat or avert a particular problem may be to deal with it before it is forced onto the

policy agenda after reaching a crisis. As it usually takes a significant lead time to build the organisation and infrastructure to deal with a problem, early recognition of the problem is helpful. Furthermore, poor decisions may result if made in haste or under pressure once a crisis has arisen, due to incomplete, inadequate or misleading information available at the time. Once a problem has become a crisis, there may also be inadequate time to define it correctly or explore the implications of alternative options. Many techniques for policy analysis, in fact, require adequate time for analysis. All these factors lead to the conclusion that the anticipation of events where decisions may be required is a precondition for effective policy analysis at other stages.

There is a tendency for governments to focus on current problems requiring action rather than on hypothetical problems that may require action in the future and which may affect a different political party. Similarly, civil servants may also move on to different roles before the hypothetical situation arises. Under such circumstances, the rewards for foresight are also negligible.

More active issue search is thus a conundrum between the rationality of cost-benefit analysis (usually in terms of career rewards for the policy-maker) and the rationality of bringing the optimal level of analysis to bear on an issue (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984). Thus, more active issue search would have to include not only new techniques for identifying issues early, but also adjustments to the political reward system for foresight in issue identification.

Need to rectify unequal access to policy agenda

The political environment results in unequal access to the policy agenda. As a result, there are variations in the extent that an issue affects a group and how issues make it onto the policy agenda. As such, it can be argued that policy analysts ought to ensure that problems of all groups in society receive equal attention.

The ability to do this is seen to be difficult in both descriptive and prescriptive models. Descriptive models point to disagreement in Western societies about the distribution of power and how it impacts the policy agenda and outcomes. Pluralists emphasise widespread distribution of power among a variety of groups, as well as the existence of multiple channels to access the policy agenda. Others suggest that power is concentrated in a particular group of economic or political elites, or that the state is structured to favour the interests of the dominant class.

Prescriptive or normative models face the ideological problem of when and how to improve the various stages of the process. For example, should a policy analyst who is aware of unequal access to the policy agenda seek to place issues that are not receiving adequate attention by policy-makers on the agenda? This type of question may imply that changes be made to the political system or processes, such as a more open government, which would be subject to critical review from outside the government apparatus.



Problem of analytical overload

More active issue search would result in a greater number of problems receiving government attention. However, as it not possible to perform costly in-depth analysis on all existing issues, adding new issues to be researched will only compound this problem. Nonetheless, the need for in-depth research depends on which issues are determined to warrant it. As such, policy analysts should determine priorities by considering all relevant issues, not just those that are the most successfully advocated by individuals or groups.

Problem of political overload

Some argue that policy analysts should not be involved in issue search, since this would result in increasing demands placed on the political system without necessarily the additional resources to support them – that is, without additional capacity within the political system to resolve these issues. Furthermore these new demands may be difficult to resolve, creating additional strain on the political system.

Arguments favouring a more active issue search include:

- better recognition of problems and opportunities that exist would increase the value society places on the political system and would improve the ability of the system to manage problems; and
- a wider issue search would result in fewer resources being wasted on bad decisions.

Locating relevant sources

Hellriegel and Slocum's four modes of scanning

The application of management literature needs to be tempered when applied to policy analysis since the nature of problems, environment and organisational structures differ, and are usually much more complex and ambiguous in the public sector.

Management “scanning” literature, which discusses the need to scan for problems and opportunities in the wide range of contexts, is one area of study that can be applied to policy issue search. Hellriegel and Slocum (1974) focus on four different modes, or contexts of scanning. These modes range from highly structured to unstructured. They include:

1. undirected viewing;
2. conditional viewing;
3. informal search; and
4. formal search.

Undirected viewing

This mode of scanning is the exposure to information without any specific purpose in mind. Analysts can scan for information about the

economic, political, social or other sciences, without knowing specifically what they hope to find. This mode of scanning is considered to be unstructured.

Conditioned viewing

This mode of scanning requires that some level of purpose be identified, in terms of both information sources and the applications of the information within a given organisation. For example, public officials travelling to another city may learn about programmes that can be applied to their city. This mode of scanning is also relatively unstructured.

Informal search

This context of scanning is not as passive as conditional viewing. Various employees, such as managers, may be required to look for information for specific purposes. For example, tax inspectors might be asked to look for information relating to the growth or decline in black market trade. Informal search represents a somewhat structured mode of scanning.

Formal search

This mode of scanning is deliberate, with a goal to acquire specific knowledge for specific purposes. Often, units within organisations are set up for these purposes. Examples of such units in private firms include research and development, and marketing departments. A formal search usually leads to the identification of unexpected problems and opportunities.

Information needs

Public sector organisations have many different needs for information. This section looks at the following factors affecting the need for information:

- changes in clientele;
- new problems; and
- new solutions.

Changes in clientele

The clients or customers of public sector programmes offer the largest potential source of information for government. At the programme level, organisations that deal directly with clients are required to provide information for budgeting. Trends in reporting and budgets may have implications for how the organisation delivers its services and to whom. This draws attention to the needs of both the organisation administering the programme and the clients it serves.

New problems

A problem or issue may exceed some threshold that then propels it onto the government agenda, making it relevant enough for the government to consider building some organisation to treat it. Examples of such



problems include air pollution and substance abuse. When a new problem or opportunity is identified, it need not require instant action from government, only further analysis to define the problem and consider policy implications.

New solutions

New information may enable better ways of delivering existing policies. Thus, the desire for better and more applicable solutions fuels the need for information. For example, computerisation has drastically changed the way information is processed and the way services are delivered by governments in key areas in Western societies, such as tax collection and overall government budgeting and planning.

Methods of active issue search

Now that you are aware of the value of active issue search, how would you carry it out? Several options are available, so this section looks at different methods and sources for issue search, including:

- literature review;
- informal sources;
- administrative sources;
- demographic analysis;
- social indicators and social data;
- forecasting models (Delphi technique); and
- evaluation of existing policies.

Literature review

Problems in active issue search are usually identified through existing sources of information (as opposed to being created by new information). Weiner (1976) suggests that a systematic scanning of printed publications (for example newspapers, journals) is likely to be the most useful source for early identification of problems. We can reasonably assume Weiner's comments can be updated to take into account electronic resources as well, although more careful consideration of sources would be required.

Large government organisations may have their own literature-scanning operations. A number of smaller, yet similar, organisations may form associations in order to conduct literature-scanning. The type of information collected from literature-scanning includes:

- information in articles that deal with an event, idea, or trend not previously identified or previously discontinued; and
- the implications of the new information on the medium and long-term for the policy area in which the organisation is situated.

Informal sources

In both the business and public sectors, the bulk of potentially useful and important information comes from informal means. Informal sources can be used to find out about threats and opportunities in a timely manner that

may otherwise never make it into mainstream media. In order for informal sources to gain greater use in the policy process, decision-makers and management must recognise the value of issue search for the organisation. For example, incentives may encourage policy analysts or administrators to raise issues to the attention of the established order within the organisation.

Administrative sources

Administrative sources can also provide information useful for issue search. However, it is important to review administrative systems to ensure that administrative sources provide accurate information. The type of information collected by administrative sources at the point of delivery and/or the way in which a programme is delivered can also be adjusted, if necessary, to allow for the collection of important information.

Demographic analysis

The analysis of future trends in demographics – that is, the structure of the population – can provide a whole array of implications for public policy, especially in social services. Detailed analysis may also affect policy planning and budgeting. However, as it is very difficult to forecast variables dependent on human behaviour, demographic forecasting may not yield very effective predictions. Rather, demographic analysis is useful to identify areas of uncertainty, the implications of which can be studied later in the policy analysis process.

Social indicators and social data

Other forms of social data are also useful for identifying policy problems. These include social information relating directly to individuals, such as personal health and social information relating to indirect conditions, such as details about home and car ownership.

In the 1960s the United Kingdom government used social indicators not only to identify problems, but also to provide measures of social improvements corresponding to national economic accounts. However, these efforts proved problematic for a number of reasons:

1. disagreements about how the changes in indicators ought to be applied in public policy;
2. problems due to lack of knowledge about social processes; and
3. problems of measurement – that is, selecting both valid and reliable indicators. Currently, censuses provide much of the social data studied, albeit at a highly aggregated, often national level.

Forecasting models (Delphi technique and brainstorming)

A number of judgemental forecasting techniques exist to help predict the future. Judgemental forecasting depends on intuitive judgements rather than quantitative analysis. These techniques are useful as supplements to other types of analyses. The ability of these models to predict the future



accurately is questionable, but they can be useful to make explicit relevant insights gained through informal scanning.

One model of judgemental forecasting is the Delphi technique. It assumes that useful forecasts can be developed by examining the intuitive judgements of experts or those in power in the area of interest. The technique depends on the assumption that these judgements can best be derived from individuals in a group, as group dynamics will also exhibit how the views and status of different members are ordered compared to others in the group, providing additional inputs to the forecasting model.

Brainstorming is almost the opposite of the Delphi technique. Brainstorming assumes that there is synergy when people are collectively developing lists about future development. Ideas proposed by one member may prompt other participants to come up with ideas that may not have been articulated or overlooked. The predictive capabilities of this model are questionable, but the exercise may lead to the identification of threats and opportunities that other analysis tools may miss.

Evaluation of existing policies

Evaluations of existing policies can provide important feedback into a new round of decision-making. Useful evaluations can provide information about poor programme design and changing circumstances. You will examine the role of evaluations more thoroughly in Module Eight – Policy Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation.

Gaining access to the policy agenda and engaging assistance

Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation

In 1960s North America, there was a surge in public concern that traditional mechanisms for interaction between government and society – namely, the electoral system, political parties, legislators, pressure groups and mass media – did not satisfy the public's need to provide input into the public policy process.

In Canada and elsewhere, participatory democracy was gaining popularity. Citizens began to demand more accessibility for participation in government affairs and better government control over its representatives. In response, the government acceded to these demands by making changes to the representative system (whereby the public is now able to provide more input through their elected political representatives and political parties) and by developing instruments to permit more direct public participation in the policy process (for example, task forces, advisory bodies and commissions).

Kernaghan and Siegel (1999) note that public participation is a concept that is broader than citizen participation. Public participation is applicable to a wide range of direct and indirect forms of participation, which includes citizen participation, as well as citizens' group participation in the policy decision-making process. The purpose of citizen participation

is to stimulate discussion on particular issues early in the policy process rather than for citizens to review the administration of government programmes critically.

Sherry Arnstein (1969) provides a useful means of conceptualising the different levels of citizen participation through the eight rungs of the ladder of participation. The ascending rungs reflect a progression of citizen involvement from levels of nonparticipation to participation and finally to the exercise of citizen power. She organises levels of participation into three categories (from lowest to highest):

1. nonparticipation.
2. token participation.
3. real citizen power.

Figure 1 offers a presentation of all eight steps of the ladder. Kernaghan and Siegel suggest that in Canada much of what is considered citizen participation falls within the level of token participation on Arnstein's ladder.

Fig 1: Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation





Policy communities and networks

Policy communities and networks are an extension of the bureaucratic politics method of policy-making. In the bureaucratic politics approach (also referred to as the governmental politics approach) an emphasis is placed on the dominance of government organisations in the public policy-making process. However, as issues and policies have become more complex, government organisations have lost their pre-eminence as well as their monopoly in policy-making and implementation. They are now compelled to involve other parties external to the government to gather information and gain consensus in the policy process.

Policy communities are clusters or groups of individuals and groups organised around a particular policy or issue. Typically, a cluster will include government officials or organisations, interest groups, individuals, corporations and media representatives such as journalists. The collection of organisations around a specific policy constitutes a *policy community* and their interconnectedness represents a *policy network*.

As you will examine in greater detail in Modules Four and Five, which deal with policy analysis theories, the policy community and networks approach argues that policies are made through interactions within the policy community. The nature of the policy network can be characterised in different ways. At one extreme, the network may be concentrated, whereby one government agency works with one dominant interest group to make all major policy decisions. At the other extreme is a complex system whereby decisions are made by taking into consideration several government agencies and several parties, each with varying levels of power within the policy community. These players will jockey for position and power within the group. Furthermore, the nature of a policy community will change over time as players, their interests and other factors affecting the policy environment change.

Interest groups

The term interest group and pressure group are often used interchangeably. However, interest groups are often also used to denote a group that performs a broad range of functions under consideration, whereas a pressure group, by contrast, would be used when the focus is primarily on the exercise of political pressure. In this section, we will use the term interest group and pressure group interchangeably.

Pressure groups or *interest groups* are organisations comprised of people who have joined together for mutual gain with the aim to further their interests by influencing public policy (Kernaghan & Siegel, 1999, p. 504). While these groups do not have any legal or hierarchical authority over government, they nonetheless influence the development and implementation of public policy.

Every policy area has one or more pressure group. As such, there are many pressure groups in the political arena. A sampling of pressure

groups includes corporations, labour, teachers, students, professionals, agriculturalists, environmentalists and so forth.

Pressure groups have been categorised according to criteria such as their objectives, activities and structure. Our discussion focuses on the following three categories:

1. institutional groups;
2. issue-oriented groups; and
3. special-interest versus public-interest groups.

Institutional groups

Institutional groups are denoted by organisational cohesion and endurance. Organisational continuity is a key feature. These organisations are highly knowledgeable about the policy-making process and how to influence decision-makers. They often employ professionals, their membership is stable and they are concrete on operational objectives. In addition, they have sufficiently broad aims, enabling them to bargain with government – that is, they have the ability and resources to compromise and make concessions. Institutional groups are more concerned with long-term credibility with government instead of any particular issue or objective.

Issue-oriented groups

These groups tend to be less-organised than institutional groups. They usually have less knowledge about government processes and how to work effectively through public officials. Issue-oriented groups are also subject to constant turnover in membership and often focus on one or two issues at any given time. They are not usually concerned with building long-term relationships or credibility with the government.

Institutional groups and issue-oriented groups are essentially the two extremes of policy participants. Most pressure groups, in fact, fall on a continuum between the two. It might be helpful to consider these groups in terms of the characteristics they possess that are similar or dissimilar to one extreme or the other. Pressure groups can also move along the continuum over time.

Special interest groups versus public interest groups

Most pressure groups fall into the special interest group category. Special interests are those that affect their members directly. Public interests, conversely, are those that are concerned with the broader, general interests of the public. Here, too, most groups can be viewed on a continuum between special and public interests, since most groups are motivated to some extent by aspects of both self-interest and the public interest. However, from a tactical perspective, most groups, regardless of their real inclinations, seek to emphasise the extent to which their activities serve the public interest.



Advisory councils and think tanks (policy institutes)

Advisory and think tanks also play an important advocacy role. These groups attempt to influence public policy decisions from outside government. Advisory councils are created by governments and are composed of private citizens. The councils are technically located outside the normal government bureaucracy to promote objective and creative responses to their assigned tasks. They operate as an independent source of advice to a minister without input from the public service. However, advisory councils receive their funding from the government. As such, they are required to tread a course that ensures they maintain credibility with the government but avoid being captured by it.

Think tanks, also called policy institutes, are non-profit organisations that are also outside of government. They are primarily involved with the production of research and analysis, as well as holding conferences and workshops to inform or influence public opinion. They do not receive direct government funding and so are more likely to have greater independence.

Think tanks vary in size, activities and influence. Some may focus exclusively on research, while others may focus on building business-government partnerships or other collaborations. Still others may target specific issues, such as labour unions and other social organisations. Herman Bakvis (1997, pp. 304-305) believes think tanks can have a significant impact on the policy process, especially in agenda-setting due to their marketing and packaging of policy analysis.

Acquiring and using leverage

Role of interest groups

According to Kernaghan and Siegel (1999), the overriding goal of interest groups is to influence the development and implementation of public policies. Let us now consider what the authors consider to be the main functions of interest groups at the operational level:

1. communication;
2. legitimisation; and
3. regulation and administration.

Communication

The main function of interest groups is two-way communication between their members and government officials involved in the policy decision-making process. The content of communications may be comprised of detailed, technical information on existing or suggested policy options, programmes and regulations. Alternatively, content of communications may include direct demands of the government to intervene on particular issues (for example, pollution). The form that the communication takes often depends on its contents as well as the nature of the pressure group.

Institutional groups are the most likely to benefit from the two-way communication and influence between themselves and the government.

Legitimation

Pressure groups also serve the important function of legitimation in the political system. Government officials – through consultation with pressure groups and others affected by a given policy – can determine and seek support for the policy. By including such input into the policy process, policies achieve some extent of legitimacy in the eyes of groups representing those likely to be affected by a policy, since an opportunity exists to raise concerns, which government decision-makers can then take into account. The inclusion of the opinions of those affected, or their representatives, also increases legitimacy of the policy among the greater public.

As such, government officials and public servants are very likely to seek pressure-group input into both the policy development and implementation stages. These groups are also able to ensure that the policy-making process includes a diverse source of outside knowledge and experience and that outside support for the government's policies exists.

Regulation and administration

Pressure groups may also be of assistance to the government by regulating and administering programmes for their own membership. This is most clearly seen in professional associations, such as in the medical, accounting, legal and engineering fields. The governing bodies of these professions regulate their members through various means, including enforcement of penalties. Pressure groups also assist the government by conducting research and collecting information that is used to develop and carry out regulatory and legislative activities.

Recognition of interest group by public officials

The access of pressure groups to public officials largely depends on whether the group has achieved official recognition. Official recognition refers to the “extent to which officials perceive the group as useful, credible and legitimate” (Kernaghan & Siegel, 1999, p. 491). The government confers tangible recognition when interest group leaders are approached and considered for nomination to official bodies and when the group's leaders are called to consult on legislative or administrative matters (Kwavnick, 1970, p. 58).

Recognition increases the access and influence of an interest group. Groups that have recognition are alerted early on in the consideration of governmental initiatives and, as such, are able to anticipate and react to these initiatives. Kernaghan and Siegel (1999) maintain that there are three bases of recognition:

1. expertise and experience;
2. size of clientele; and



3. political clout.

Expertise and experience

Pressure groups can provide expertise and experience to the public officials. Public servants commonly consult with pressure groups and, in return, provide them with greater access to government. Public servants rely on these groups to provide accurate data for informed decision-making.

Size of clientele

Another basis for official recognition is the size of the clientele of a specific government department. For example, farmers' groups constitute a large clientele of departments of agriculture. Such a relationship has both benefits and costs. The government department can use the pressure group as a source of information or a channel of communication to the group's members. The groups can also be used to gain support for government policies. Therefore, governments must maintain constructive relationships with the groups and avoid conflict with them. Groups also benefit from the relationship since they are able to access and influence the department. However, if a group becomes too close within a single government department, it may limit its opportunities to influence policy. As such, pressure groups try to develop support with multiple departments within government.

Political clout

Finally, a group's political clout also serves as a basis for recognition since public officials – including ministers, legislators and public servants – are very interested in the political impact that the activities of pressure groups can have on the public in the next election. Even though public servants are supposed to be non-partisan, they are responsible for informing their ministers of the impacts of government decisions. Public servants, therefore, will be disposed towards those groups that can help them help the minister.

Protecting credibility

Katherine Graham and Susan Phillips (1997) hold that even though public participation has increased since the 1960s, public hearings, public meetings and open forums in the service of policy-making have increasingly been discredited. Graham and Phillips (p. 260) suggest that much "public participation" has been dominated by professionals who are not well-connected to political and public decision-makers. Governments usually participate in "tell and sell" rather than real consultation when discussing serious issues.

The credibility of information and policies can thus be called into question. The role of the media, freedom of information legislation, ministerial responsibility and whistle-blowing all have an impact on ensuring the credibility of the government and its public servant officials in policy-making.

The media

The media act as intermediaries between the government and the general public. Mass media includes radio, television, newspapers and magazines. The mass media is often assumed to disseminate information for its own sake as opposed to transmitting it for the purposes of influencing public policy. Information put out by the media does not usually focus on specifics of policy, although it isn't unusual for the media to present and analyse alternatives. The mass media's audience is usually broad, including both the government and the public.

The effect of the media on public policy has been widely discussed. One way to look at the role of the media in public policy is through three competing activities:

1. the media as watchdog.
2. the media as lapdog.
3. the media as attack dog.

The press, as a watchdog on government, acts essentially as a branch of government. It keeps the public informed on key issues and government activity and ensures that government goals and activities are aligned with the will of the people. It also serves to energise and engage the public in a democratic system. **The press as a lapdog** occurs where news media are lackeys to the powerful, both in government and in business. Here the media follow frames and news established by elites and rarely challenges the status quo. According to this view, the media does not inform the public, but encourages disengagement from politics and thus helps the powerful get even more powerful. Finally, the concept of **the media as attack dog** contends that the press is a beast out to trash politicians, government officials and most established institutions. It disrupts policy processes and fails to inform the public by focusing on negatives and on scandal rather than substance. The media as attack dog disillusion the public and turns them off politics completely. Although this may seem to be a useful way to view the role of media, in reality you would find it extremely difficult to classify the mass media into any one of these categories.

Since an important aspect of governing in democracies is to keep society informed about government activities, processes and institutions, all governments generate information. In some cases, there are government departments responsible for collecting and disseminating information, such as census groups. Government departments may also provide information to the public, such as how to conserve energy. Other departments may focus on providing information to specialised groups, such as technical or scientific research groups.

Governments also require information on the needs and demands of citizens, which the media also provides. Although the government does not depend on the media for information of a technical nature, it is



interested in the media's coverage of political and policy issues that reflect the attitudes of the public.

Government representatives that interact with the media include ministers, members of parliament, senior government bureaucrats and public servants. Key actors in media-government interactions from the media's side are journalists, editors, executives and owners of print and broadcast organisations.

Freedom of information

One possible method to ensure credibility of the government and its policies is by opening access to government information, which enables the public and media to make informed decisions and contributions to policy discussion.

In Canada, the federal government has traditionally operated on the basis that all government information is secret unless the government decides to release it. Proponents of freedom of information legislation argue that the government should instead release all information unless it can make a solid case as to why specific information should not be released. This would remove the current onus placed on the public to justify their demand for information and, instead, put the onus on the government to justify why it can't release certain information.

In Canada, the federal *Access to Information Act* permits the government to keep much information private, but nonetheless attempts to release as much as possible to the public without them having to justify their need for it.

Ministerial responsibility and political neutrality

An important aspect of the impact of freedom of information legislation is whether such legislation infringes upon ministerial responsibility. To a lesser degree, there are also concerns that such legislation reduces political neutrality and the anonymity of public servants.

Ministers and public servants may not be as supportive of freedom of information legislation and public access to the material used for decision-making since there is the potential for consequences on ministerial responsibility and political neutrality. Opposition parties and politicians could exploit disagreements among ministers and/or between ministers and public servants, which could cause controversy and problems for the governing party.

Furthermore, public servants may not want their personal views to be aired in public, since their anonymity – and thus potentially their candid contributions to the policy process – may decline. Lack of anonymity threatens the ability to be frank with criticism and potentially limits the careers of public servants.

Exemptions

Exemptions to freedom of information legislation depend largely on the mechanisms used to review complaints about non-disclosure in order to determine whether information should remain confidential or not. For example, if ultimate review authority is granted to ministers, they would be likely to seek a small list of specific exemptions, which would allow them greater discretion in dealing with the bulk of information considered for release. However, if an independent body makes final exemptions, they would likely seek a broad list of specific exemptions.

Governments agree that certain types of information should be kept secret. A small list of such documents includes those relating to defence and security, information about individual citizens collected for the provision of government services and records of criminal investigations.

The review process

In Canada, the task of applying the exemption provisions of the freedom of information legislation falls to the public service. Ultimately though, the legislation must identify one person or position to whom citizens can appeal their case. In Canada, under the freedom of information legislation, there is a two-tier review system in place involving an information commissioner and judicial review.

The information commissioner receives and investigates complaints when access to a record is refused, when unduly high fees are imposed to recover information, when the record is not in the desired official national language, or for any other matter related to request for information. After the investigation, the information commissioner makes a recommendation: either yes, the information can be released or no, it can not. If the commissioner decides against the complainant, the complainant or the commissioner can apply for a federal court review of the request. The court may then order the government to disclose or not disclose all or part of the record being sought for release.

Whistle-blowing

Whistle-blowing in government refers to the practice of public servants making sensitive exempted information (such as that exempted from freedom of information legislation) known to the public. Whistle-blowing applies to both open disclosure as well as “leaks” to persons or organisations outside the government, which raises concern about harmful acts committed, contemplated or allowed to occur by public servants or their superiors (Kernaghan & Langford, 1990).

Usually, the types of activities that result in whistle-blowing include illegal activities, wastage of public money and threats to public safety. However, there does not appear to be a consensus on the level of seriousness required to justify such action (Kernaghan & Siegel 1999, p. 517). There is the risk that a whistle-blower may have other motivations for whistle-blowing, such as publicity or partisanship.



The other method to alert those outside government to problems is by public servants leaking information, which is much less risky than whistle-blowing. The public servant who leaks information may be subject to disciplinary action for violating their oath of public office and secrecy. Nonetheless, there is support and in many jurisdictions even statutory protection for whistle-blowers from retaliation or harm due to their public disclosure of information that, in the public interest, should be disclosed.

In summary, the media, freedom of information legislation, whistle-blowing and whistle-blower protections all help to ensure the credibility of government policies and actions, since all these channels allow for greater transparency and accountability of government actions to the public.

Module summary



Summary

Your goal in Module Three has been to gain an introductory understanding to the use of information in the policy-making process and the policy agenda.

The Module began with a review of the need for simple methods of policy analysis and planning. Varying models are available, but you need to be aware of both their strengths and limitations.

Similarly, more active issue search serves to anticipate problems and opportunities to rectify unequal access to the policy agenda. However, there are some drawbacks as well; namely, analytical overload and political overload.

The next section focused on locating relevant sources and discussed Hellriegel and Slocum's four modes of scanning model, information needs, and methods of active issue search.

The section dealing with gaining access to the policy agenda and engaging assistance covered the concept of Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation as well as discussion of key actors in the policy process: policy communities, networks and interest groups.

Next, the module examined how groups acquire and use leverage to influence the policy-making process. The section dealt with the role of interest groups and the recognition of interest groups by public officials.

Finally, the last section of Module Three, on protecting credibility, outlined five different factors that can influence or improve the credibility of government policy-making. These are:

1. the media.
2. freedom of information legislation.
3. whistle-blowing.
4. ministerial responsibility and political neutrality.
5. the review process.



Self-study questions



Study skills

1. How would you determine whether a particular source of information on policy issues is reliable or not? What would you look for that distinguishes a solid professional analysis of an issue from one that is weaker or biased?
2. What kind of measures do you think would be the most accurate in determining whether public high schools are performing well or not? You may want to consider the following (The national high school certificate examination scores of graduating students, national achievement test scores in a variety of subject areas or other factors you identify).
3. Consider the case of a situation of illegal immigration in a country. What is the nature of the immigration problem? Provide evidence showing how you would deal with the immigration issue, where would you gain this evidence from?

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