QUADRANT CONSEIL

Problem Definition and Theory of Change: What For?

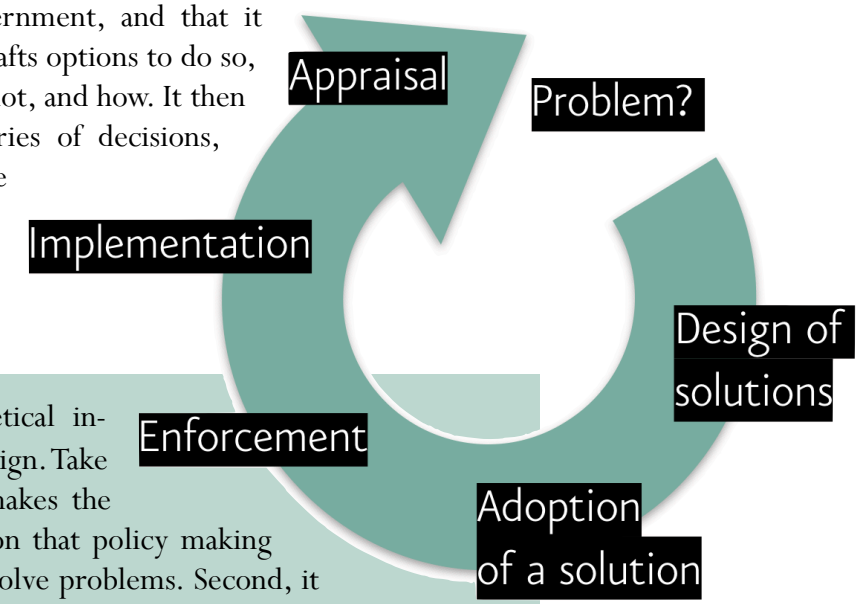
WHAT IS A POLICY?

As EC Officers, you are involved in a process of policy making. A public policy can be defined by:

- its **content** (a government programme of actions in a given sector);
- by the **choices** made by governments (policies are "what government chooses to do or not to do" Dye, 1972);
- by its **logic** (a set of policy means contributing to policy goals Lasswell, 1958);
- and also by its **process**.

The "policy cycle" is a popular way to represent the different stages of a policy design process. It was first used by Harold Lasswell, but many others have been using this image since then Howlett 2010.

In the **policy cycle**, there is a problem at stake that comes to the attention of a government, and that it wishes to solve; the government drafts options to do so, and decides whether it will act or not, and how. It then implements the policies, by a series of decisions, acts, funding, etc. It monitors the policy unfolding and, eventually, appraises the results (was the problem solved?) through evaluation.



The policy cycle is a theoretical instrument to think about policy design. Take it with a grain of salt: first, it makes the (somewhat contestable) assumption that policy making is always a rational endeavour to solve problems. Second, it considers that this process is linear and sequential, which is far from being true either. Éric Monnier talks of a "policy whirlpool" to describe the iterative process of policy design Monnier et al. 1992. Third, it considers policies as something *governments* do, though we know that policies in practice are as much *what organisations and people decide to do* in reaction to government decisions than what governments do Pawson and Tilley 2004. But it is a useful model to think in terms of policy design (what is needed to actually design policies?) and evaluation.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

If policy is a problem-solving activity, being able to explain what is the problem is the key to the whole policy design process.

A public problem can be defined as "any failing situation which affects a society or a part of it by an imbalance, a tension, the inadequacies or frustrations that it created and which provokes a collective action to rectify, mitigate or improve it" Rezsöhazy, 1996.

Not all problems lead to policy action, and the fact that a problem becomes a subject of political debate is not always related to its importance. But there are "windows of opportunity" Kingdon, 1995, moments when different "streams" collide, i.e. when there is a shared consciousness that there is a problem at stake; stakeholders advocating for solutions; and a political opportunity to deal with this issue.

An important aspect question of policy design is then how to make the best of such moments (which are short-lived and far apart).

The complicated part is that **problems are "framed" in a certain way** when the policy design process starts, which means that there is a certain view that is imposed on what the problem is, what causes it and what are its consequences.

This "framing effect" is possible, first because real-life problems (think "crime", "poverty" or "global warming") are extremely complex and entangled; their causes are multiple, often not linear; they cannot be totally embraced and therefore it is extremely hard to understand them, let alone fix them. They are said to be "wicked" Rittel & Webber, 1973.

So, **one has to find an angle of attack**. The thing is, governments tend to think in terms of the instruments they have at their disposal and their area of jurisdiction Bardach, 1980. This means that problems are also framed by the solutions that are at the government disposal ("If you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail"). Stakeholders can try to influence problem definition by proposing solutions.

At the EC level, whether a problem has to be dealt with by DG Environment or DG Agri is likely to lead to very different solutions.

The fact also is that public problems are not objective phenomena: what is a problem for some or at a given moment is not for others (think: sex equality). They are social constructions, which means they are shaped by people and organisations, whose views and actions *are, in turn, shaped* by problem definition. This also entails that problem definition is subject to political debates, as well as pressures and interests of the economically and politically powerful, etc. (on this topic and the implications for evaluation, see Archibald, 2019).

The consequence is that the problem definition process is not only a construction process, but also a *deconstruction* process, in which it is necessary to understand how a problem is represented, as well as the consequences of this representation.

For instance, initially framing the problem of "climate change" as an issue of individual behaviours, market equilibrium, or technological solutions will have different implications than a focus on the fossil-fuel industry, global imbalance and equity.

For a critique of climate change policies, see Somerville, 2019

There are different ways to do so, e.g. through a participatory (by asking the different stakeholders, including the silent, less powerful ones, how they view the problem or are affected by it) or a critical approach (for an example, see Bacchi's "What's the problem represented to be" approach [2009]).

In the end, the deconstruction of the problem through its representation, but also through its components, especially its different root causes will help providing alternatives in the angles of attack that governments can use to address it: e.g., rather than trying to address "crime", or to address it through preconceived solutions, it will be possible through the problem definition process to identify a (limited) series of crime drivers on which a government can actually act, with different expectable consequences.

Problem definition is also a key aspect of evaluation. First, analysing how the problem has been framed is a good way to uncover the values underlying a policy, which can then be used for critical appraisal and judgement; second, clarifying how a problem was initially framed and how it is framed at the moment of the evaluation (or whether it has changed in some ways) is key in being able to assess the relevance and explain why stakeholders are not satisfied with a policy anymore; and third, initial inadequacy in defining the problem is a frequent cause of ineffectiveness.

For instance, a policy aiming first at increasing agricultural production may have seemed relevant in the 1980s and be judged as irrelevant 30 years later, when what is at stake is not feeding the world anymore, but the protection of the environment.

REDUCING UNCERTAINTY

When governments and other stakeholders develop solutions at the policy design stage, they have no insurance that these can effectively address the problem in question. There are several uncertainties at stake:

- about the nature of the problem (or the adequacy of its framing);
- about the intrinsic capacity of a policy to solve or mitigate a problem as well as its implementation;
- about the reception of that policy by the stakeholders — how they will react to it and whether it will contribute to achieving policy goals or not Bardach, 1977, Wildavski 1979; Lipsky 1981;
- about the future: whether conditions or values will change and how they will affect a policy's outcomes… or how they are judged.

All these reasons, that describe the complex nature of policy design and implementation, explain why the actual outcomes of a policy cannot be forecast… and also why unforeseeable consequences, desirable or not, are very likely Morell, 2005.

In that sense, **launching a new policy is akin to a "leap of faith"**. This is reinforced by administrative processes in which policy design precedes implementation, without any chance for experimentation or feedback from the field.

One could argue that policy design (as well as evaluation) aims at reducing this uncertainty, "through the accurate anticipation of the consequences of government actions" Howlett 2010. One of the ways through which policy design can do so is **by revealing the theories about how and why a policy is supposed to work** Weiss 1995.

What is a theory (of change) here? It is the set of assumptions that are made to explain how and why a policy would solve or mitigate a problem, through a given sequence of events. For instance, considering how people who struggle with literacy are more at risk of losing their job, a policy could consist in detecting these people and convincing them to go through literacy classes, so that they accept to do so, attend the classes, and improve their literacy skills. Such a theory would include many additional hypotheses, either related to the activities (including the quality of the class) or to the issues at stake (e.g. that job loss is related to illiteracy and not to deeper factors such as poverty, racism, etc. that are connected with illiteracy as well).

Policies often include *objectives*, which are statements about the desired consequences of an intervention. But objectives belong to the field of management (what do we want to achieve? And later: did we achieve what we wanted to?): they are also focused on what governments can do (e.g. implementing training sessions), what is in their *control*, rather than what is important to them, but that they can only *influence* (increasing people skills, or that they find a job). They cannot replace assumptions about how things will work.

In the end**, the theories behind policies are too often implicit and constitute a "black box"**, full of "assumptions, conjectures, and other miracles" Archibald et al. 2016. Opening the box makes it possible to exert critical thinking on its different steps. Connell & Kubisch have identified several benefits for this, including "[sharpening] the planning and implementation" of a policy; preparing monitoring; and also facilitating evaluation 1998. The simple process of discussing the theory of change is useful in the regard, as much as the theory itself Funnel and Rogers, 2011.

For a history of the concept of a "black box", see Astbury and Leeuw 2010

Different approaches can be followed to do so, that are complementary. A participatory process will consist in engaging a discussion about people's assumptions of cause-and-effect, including the undesired consequences that can be anticipated. Social Sciences can also be used either to build initial assumptions, but also to make sense of the assumptions behind solutions that have been proposed, or again to identify unexpected, but likely consequences.

Given that policy design is an iterative process, detailing the theory of change can help rethink problem definition, or even be the starting point for it. Many policies are actually "non-designed" Kadio, Dagenais, and Ridde 2018 and an evaluation that appraises its theory of change can be the starting point of the policy design process. It should be noted though than in an evaluation, the theory of change is most of the time reconstructed to reflect the expectations of stakeholders at the moment of the evaluation, rather than at the beginning during its conception. If an initial theory of change exists, though, highlighting the differences and explaining them can be precious in assessing a policy.

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