

Policy Analytical Capacity as a Source of Policy Failure

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Abstract:

A significant factor affecting policy failures and their management issues pertains to governmental and non-governmental “policy analytical capacity”. That is, governments require a reasonably high level of policy analytical capacity in order to perform the tasks associated with managing the policy process in order to avoid the most common sources of policy failures. Governments require the ability to develop medium and long-term projections, proposals for, and evaluations of, future government activities and not simply react to short-term political, economic or other challenges and imperatives occurring in their policy environments if policy failures are to be avoided. Recent studies, however, suggest that the level of policy analytical capacity found in Canadian governments and non-governmental actors is low, contributing to a failure to effectively deal with many complex contemporary policy challenges.

Introduction: Judging Policy Success and Failure

Policies can succeed or fail in numerous ways. Sometimes an entire policy regime can fail, while more often specific programs within a policy field may be designated as successful or unsuccessful. And both policies and programs can succeed or fail either in substantive terms—that is, as objectively or perceived to be delivering or failing to deliver the goods—or in procedural terms—as being legitimate or illegitimate, fair or unfair, just or unjust.

Considerations of policy success and failure are evaluative judgements. Such judgements almost always involve officials and politicians within government dealing with the policy in question. However, policy evaluation is not an exclusive preserve of the government. It may also involve members of the public, who often will have the ultimate say on a government’s policy record when they vote at elections or decide whether or not to co-operate with government expectations. Thus the sites of policy judgements are broader than often suggested, as many accounts tend to concentrate overwhelmingly on evaluations of success or failure made by bureaucrats and a small number of ‘outside’ actors such as private consultants and think-tanks (Brandstrom and Kuipers 2003; Bovens’ t’Hart and Peters 2001). In fact, such judgements involve most of the key actors arrayed in policy subsystems in a variety of formal and informal venues for assessing and critiquing policy outcomes and processes.

The political nature of judgements about policy success and failure also implies that such assessments will rarely be unanimous. This is in part due to the fact that political evaluations depend in part on the imputation of notions of intentionality to government actors made by policy evaluators—so that the results of policy-making can be assessed against expectations. This is often a highly partisan, controversial and much less than neutral or objective task because (1) government intentions themselves can be, intentionally or otherwise, very vague and ambiguous, secret, or even potentially contradictory or mutually exclusive, (2) labels such as ‘success’ and ‘failure’ are inherently relative and will be interpreted differently by different policy actors and (3) government policies take time to put into place and circumstances may change in such a way as to render moot initial government assessments of policy contexts and judgements of the severity of policy problems and the appropriateness of particular policy tools for their solution.

It is important for policy managers to understand that designations of policy success and failure are semantic tools themselves used in public debate and policy contestation in order to seek political advantage. Policy evaluations affect considerations and consequences related to assessing blame and taking credit for government activities at all stages of the policy process, all of which can have electoral, administrative, and other consequences for policy actors.

Policy managers must be aware that policies can fail in numerous ways but governments will be held accountable for any and all of them. Policies can fail, for example, in both substantive terms - that is, as objectively or perceived to be failing to fulfil stated government or public aims - or in procedural terms - as being legitimate or illegitimate, fair or unfair, equitable or inequitable, just or unjust.

The most obvious case when a government will be held accountable for a policy failure is when an entire policy regime substantively fails, a failure which is typically very public and obvious to voters and the public-at large. In such cases managers must be prepared to acknowledge mistakes that were made, clarify the reasons why the failure occurred, and be prepared to suggest alternate routes which would avoid repeating the same or similar errors in future in order to avoid this failure leading to general procedural failure or a crisis of legitimacy. More often, however, specific programs within a policy field are what is being designated as unsuccessful and such failures will be much less visible to non-experts in the field and will not entail the threat of a general legitimation crisis requiring public intervention. Managers' efforts to deal with such failures typically would include legitimation-building exercises within the relevant policy community, such as specialized consultations with experts as part of efforts designed to correct such failures.

Understanding and Managing Policy Failures

However, while the assessment of ultimate success or failure of government action may involve a range of actors, the fault or blame for most policy failures can be pinpointed more precisely. That is, failures can occur due to over-reaching government's attempting to address 'unaddressable' or 'wicked' problems (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Churchman 1967), due to their failure to anticipate the consequences of their actions or the susceptibility of their systems to catastrophic and other kinds of collapse (Bovens and t'Hart 1996 and 1995; Perrow 1984; Roots 2004; Merton 1936), due to a variety of 'implementation failures' in which the aims of decision-makers fail to be properly or accurately translated into practice (Kerr 1976; Ingram and Mann 1980) or due to the lack of effective oversight over implementors on the part of decision-makers (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984; McCubbins and Lupia 1994; Ellig and Lavoie 1995), and finally, to the failure of governments and policy-makers to effectively evaluate policy processes and learn the correct lessons from their experiences (May 1992; Scharpg 1986).

Each of these sources of failure originates in a different stage of the policy cycle (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Stages of Policy Process and Associated Policy Failures

Agenda-Setting	Over-reaching Governments
Policy Formulation	Attempting to deal with Wicked Problems
Decision-Making	Failing to Anticipate Policy Consequences of System Structures
Policy Implementation	Principle-agent problems, oversight failures etc
Policy Evaluation	Lack of learning

However, there is also a common element tying each together, which is the failure of the policy system in government to correctly process policies – that is matching government policy capacity to effort (Painter and Pierre 2005; Peters 1996). Policy managers can address some of these issues by insisting that government intentions be clarified, made consistent, and publicized in various fora such as agency or legislative websites and annual reports as well as media releases and educational materials. They can, at the same time, insist that criteria for determining success and failure are clearly specified and their rationales justified and adhered to by government spokespersons. And they can continually monitor changing circumstances and alter some aspects of policies as these circumstances unfold. That is, they should not insist or pretend that governments are infallible or omniscient but rather promote as much as possible the notion that governments are learning organizations and ensure that lessons are indeed learned and feedback into improved policy processes and outcomes.

The types of policy management activities which can be undertaken in order to avoid many common policy failures are listed in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Stages of Policy Process and Associated Policy Failures and Management Strategies

Agenda-Setting	Over-reaching Governments	Clarification and Precision of Government Goals
Policy Formulation	Attempting to deal with Wicked Problems	Provisions of Better Data and Research on Policy Alternatives
Decision-Making	Failing to Anticipate Policy Consequences of System Structures	Better Risk Analysis and Assessment
Policy Implementation	Principle-agent problems, oversight failures etc.	Careful Design of Monitoring and Inspection Systems
Policy Evaluation	Lack of learning	Benchmarking and Performance Measurement

The Role of Policy Analysis and Policy Analytical Capacity in Causing and Correcting Policy Failures

Inspection of Figure 2 shows that a significant factor affecting policy failures and their management issues pertains to governmental and non-governmental “policy analytical capacity”. That is, each of the managerial strategies set out in figure 2 involves an aspect of policy analysis and, as such, requires that governments have a reasonably high level of policy analytical capacity in order to perform these tasks. Taken together, they require a government with the ability to develop medium and long-term projections, proposals for, and evaluations of, future government activities (Fellegi 1996, Singleton 2001, Anderson 1996, Bakvis 2000) and not simply react to short-term political, economic or ecological challenges and imperatives occurring in their policy environments.

Policy capacity can be defined as:

a loose concept which covers the whole gamut of issues associated with the government's arrangements to review, formulate and implement policies within its jurisdiction. It obviously includes the nature and quality of the resources available for these purposes—whether in the public service or beyond—and the practices and procedures by which these resources are mobilized and used (Fellegi 1996).

While ‘policy capacity’ can be thought of as extending to day-to-day administrative activities involved in policy implementation, “policy analytical capacity” is a more focussed concept. It refers to the amount of basic research a government can conduct or access, its ability to apply statistical methods, applied research methods, and advanced modelling techniques to this data and employ analytical techniques such as environmental scanning, trends analysis, and forecasting methods in order to gauge broad public opinion and attitudes, as well as those of interest groups and other major policy players, and to anticipate future policy impacts. It also involves the ability to communicate policy related messages to interested parties and stakeholders (Anderson 1996).

The policy functions outlined above can be viewed by senior managers “as a checklist against which they can review the policy capacity and skills of their own organization” (Anderson

1996). Additionally, Ivan Fellegi (1996) argues, “the criteria for evaluation should include a department’s capacity to articulate its medium and long term priorities”. Fittingly, Anderson (1996) argues that in order to strengthen policy capacity in the federal government there are additional areas that have to be addressed, including the articulation of medium and long-term priorities. Furthermore, Anderson (1996) argues that the “management of policy work needs greater attention.” In fact, management decides, in general, at what level of determination policy related functions exist in periods of downtime or in between projects. For instance, are employees presented opportunities to strengthen their skills and expertise?

Additional factors to be measured with regard to policy analytical capacity include the “relevance and value” of the work conducted or produced, as well as the quality of employees determined through the identification of relevant credentials, experience and skill. Others include whether or not there is sufficient horizontal coordination between branches within the DOJ, and the perceived effectiveness of such coordination, along with the management of relations with external policy actors. As Anderson (1996) notes, “a healthy policy-research community outside government can play a vital role in enriching public understanding and debate of policy issues, and it serves as a natural complement to policy capacity within government.”

Complementing Anderson’s factors of policy analytical capacity are the components outlined by Riddell (2007), including: “a recognized requirement or demand for research; a supply of qualified researchers; ready availability of quality data; policies and procedures to facilitate productive interactions with other researchers; and a culture in which openness is encouraged and risk taking is acceptable.” These elements are set out in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Aspects of Political Analytical Capacity

Components
Environmental scanning, trends analysis and forecasting methods
Theoretical research
Statistics, applied research and modelling
Evaluation of the means of meeting targets/goals
Consultation and managing relations
Program design, implementation monitoring and evaluation
Department’s capacity to articulate its medium and long term priorities
Policy analytical resources - Quantity and quality of employees; annual departmental reports; budgets

Policy Analytical Capacity in Practice

Policy analysis is a relatively recent movement, dating back to the 1960s and the US experience with large-scale planning processes in areas such as defence, urban re-development and budgeting (Lindblom 1958; Wildavsky 1969; MacRae and Wilde, 1985; Garson 1986). Seen as a social movement, albeit with a technical discipline, it represents the efforts of actors inside and outside formal political decision-making processes to improve policy outcomes by applying systematic evaluative rationality. There have been debates about whether policy analysis has improved on the outcomes associated with less instrumental processes such as bargaining, compromise, negotiation and log-rolling (Majone 1989). However, there has been no fundamental challenge to the primary *raison d’être* of policy analysts: to improve policy outcomes by applying systematic analytic methodologies to policy problems.

Empirical studies of the actual behaviour and job performance of policy analysts has constantly challenged the view that policy analysis is all about the neutral, competent and objective performance of tasks associated with a small suite of technical policy analytical tools. Beginning with the path-breaking work of Meltsner (1972 and 1976) through the work of

Durning and Osama (1994) and, more recently Parsons (2004), Page and Jenkins (2005), Hird (2005), and Colebatch (2005 and 2006), studies in the U.S. (Radin 2000), the UK (Page and Jenkins 2005) and the Netherlands (Hoppe and Jeliaskova 2006) have consistently revealed that the set of jobs and duties actually performed by policy analysts in government and non-governmental organizations is very closely tied to the resources they have at their disposal in terms of personnel and funding; the demand they face from clients and managers for high quality results, and the availability of high quality data and information on future trends (Fellegi 1996; Anderson 1996).

This raises to the fore the question of what do policy analysts actually do in contemporary policy analysis? Are their training and resources appropriate to allow them to meet contemporary governance challenges such as designing effective policies for climate change adaptation? In the UK, for example, Page and Jenkins (2005) provided some empirical evidence that contrary to the picture of carefully-recruited analysts trained in policy schools to undertake specific types of micro-economic-inspired policy analysis (Weimer and Vining 1999), UK policy-making typically featured a group of 'policy process generalists' who rarely, if ever, dealt with policy matters in the substantive areas in which they were trained and who had, in fact, very little training in formal policy analysis techniques such as cost-benefit analysis. As they concluded:

“The broad features of our characterization of UK policy bureaucracy are that policy officials at relatively junior levels are given substantial responsibility for developing and maintaining policy and servicing other, formally superior officials or bodies, often by offering technical advice and guidance. These people are not technical specialists in the sense that they develop high levels of technical expertise in one subject or stay in the same job for a long time. They are often left with apparently substantial discretion to develop policy because they often receive vague instructions about how to do their jobs, are not closely supervised, and work in an environment that is in most cases not overtly hierarchical (Page and Jenkins 2005 p. 168)

Policy Analytical Capacity in Canada

How does Canada shape up with regard to this important indicator (and predictor) of policy success or failure? Little is known about the supply and demand for policy analysis in Canada, although recent critiques of the pedagogy of public administration and public policy programmes suggest there is good reason to suspect a significant gap between pedagogy and practice may exist in this country (Gow and Sutherland 2004a and 2004b). While Canadians have written a variety of best-selling texts on policy studies and policy analysis (Howlett and Ramesh 2003; Pross 1992; Pal 1997; Brooks 1989; Weimer and Vining 1999), these texts operate at a high level of generality and are based, for the most part on secondary sources. Some empirical works exist, of course, upon which these texts rely (see Pal 1993; Pross 1967) but these tend to be at least a decade old, if not much older.

Very little is also known about the actual work of policy analysts in contemporary Canadian governments. Early works in the late 1970s and early 1980s on the emerging policy analysis professions provided little empirical evidence of what analysts actually did in practice (Prince 1979; Prince and Chenier 1980), but rather often simply assumed they would contribute to the increased rationality of policy-making through the application of systematic analytical techniques such as cost-benefit analysis (Boardman et al 2001; Patton and Sawicki 1993) to the evaluation of policies and policy alternatives. Later studies in the 1980s noted the growth and subsequent decline of employment of policy analysts in government and examined their links to politicians and senior administrators but, again, without providing empirical detail on their tasks and activities, or upon the reception their work received (Bennett and McPhail 1992; Hollander and Prince 1993). Similarly, work since the early 1990s has suggested that tasks of policy

analysts may be shifting towards increased emphasis on policy process design and network management activities but, again, without much in the way of empirical evidence to support this claim (Lindquist 1992; Howlett and Lindquist 2004).

Evidence to date, however, (Dobuzinskis, Howlett and Laycock 2007) is that the current policy analytical capacity of the Canadian *federal* government, although varied in terms of its distribution among Departments and between Departments and Central Agencies (Perl and White 2002, Voyer 2007), is reasonably high by historical and comparative standards (Hoppe and Jeliaskova 2006, Mintrom 2007, Prince 2007). The federal government and several provinces have eliminated their deficits and began to experience surplus positions and consider new expenditure programmes. In Ottawa, highly centralized decision-making systems took shape in the hands of the Prime Minister/Premier and the Minister of Finance (Savoie 1999; Bernier, Brownsey and Howlett 2005) with a focus on performance management (Saint-Martin 1998). This results orientation has led the federal government to increasingly adopt horizontal and holistic perspectives on problems such as climate change adaptation, and to try to better align initiatives across governments and sectors (Aucoin and Bakvis 2005). However, federal government policy capacity needed re-energizing after the cuts of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly in key departments tasked to assist in identifying new priorities and strategies towards dealing with climate change (Lindquist and Desveaux 1998).

At the federal level, some of this capacity restoration has occurred, but in a different way from the heyday of policy analysis in Departmental and Central Agency policy units in the 1970s and early 1980s (Hollander and Prince 1993). In the late 1990s, for example, the Policy Research Initiative promoted collaboration with an ever-expanding array of university institutes and think tanks (Voyer 2007; Bakvis 2000) as a way to rebuild federal policy analytical capacity. This is significant since the number and range of players in policy areas such as climate change – governments, interest groups, think tanks, Aboriginal communities, NGOs, international organizations and others – has expanded along with the range of issues with which analysts must now be concerned (Pross 1992; Atkinson and Coleman 1989; Coleman and Skogstad 1990). This has created a far more complicated policy-making environment for governments trying to deal with climate change issues since different strategies for building arguments and cases for policy initiatives and far more consultation is required than in past eras. Policy development processes now typically contain mandated criteria for consultations and political leaders and administrators typically access polling data and conduct focus groups as part of the standard process of policy development. Thus, not only is the demand for traditional technical skills required by analysts performing cost-benefit analysis and risk assessment, for example, heightened, but the need for new networking skills is also very much apparent (Howlett and Lindquist 2004). Whether or not the policy analytical capacity of the federal government has grown sufficiently to deal with this increased scope, range and complexity is very uncertain.

Moreover, while policy analytical capacity at the federal level may have improved somewhat in recent years from its nadir in the late 1980s and early 1990s, evidence at the *provincial* and *local* levels - although much less extensive than at the federal level - suggests that analytical capacity at these levels is much weaker (Rasmussen 1999; Smith and Stewart 2007; McArthur 2007), leading to an almost exclusively short-term focus in many policies and programs adopted at these levels of government. Within the *non-governmental* community, the situation is even bleaker, with current evidence suggesting that with the possible exception of some major Canadian business associations and corporations (Stritch 2007), capacity is also very limited or non-existent. This is true of a majority of actors involved in the Canadian labour movement (Jackson and Baldwin 2007), the voluntary sector (Phillips 2007), as well as the media (Murray 2007), think tanks (Abelson 2002; 2007), and political parties (Cross 2007). In many cases analysis is carried out by consultants rather than paid staff, contributing to the transitory nature of much program design and policy analysis in Canada (Speers 2007; Perl and White 2002; Bakvis 2000; Saint Martin 1998).

Conclusion

In their 2006 study of the policy analytical activities undertaken in the US, the UK and several other European countries, Colebatch and Radin concluded that three areas currently exist as priorities for contemporary research work on policy analysis:

- (1) “We need more empirical research on the nature of policy work in specific contexts: how policy workers (and which sort) get a place at the table, how the question is framed, what discourse is accepted as valid, and how this work relates to the outcome at any point in time;
- (2) “What sort of activity do practitioners see as policy work, and what sort of policy workers do they recognize” and
- (3) “There are questions for teaching and professional preparation” which will derive from these first two studies (Colebatch and Radin, 2006 p. 225).

In Canada, recent volumes such as Dobuzinskis, Howlett and Laycock (2007) provide some evidence of the activities of analysts in a wider range of situations, both inside and outside of government, than has usually considered or investigated in the past. However, as in Europe and the U.S., questions related to the basic the ‘sociology’ of policy analysis in Canada – who policy analysts are and what policy analysts actually do – and its pedagogy - how they are trained, and how their training fits their job – and what is their overall capacity to perform their assigned tasks – remain the outstanding research questions in this field.

Studies of the U.S. (Meltsner 1979; Durning and Osama 1994, Hird 2005), the UK (Page and Jenkins 2005) and the Netherlands (Hoppe and Jeliaskova 2006) provide insights into the ‘real worlds of policy analysis’ which may well also apply to Canadian public policy-making, as carried out by the hundreds of advisors who, collectively, are responsible for designing and developing policies .

The weak policy capacity and short-term analytical focus found among most of the major actors involved in Canadian government is very problematic in the context of dealing with the challenges of complex contemporary policy challenges. In particular it appears very ill-suited for the development of ongoing and long-term solutions required to deal with problems like climate change mitigation and adaptation. Canadian governments and non-governmental actors are being asked to design and implement effective mitigation and adaptation measures with long-term consequences while many of these organizations may simply lack the analytical capacity to do so. In such contexts, ‘failure may be the only option’.

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