

Healthy Public Policy

Quick Start Reference



Use this quick start reference sheet to help you and your team consider where to enter the policy process, the type of influence or change you want to achieve and to provide examples of indicators for policy influence or change. Ideally, this quick reference guide is for individuals and/or organizations who are engaged in research, policy analysis or inquiry, and advocacy that work towards healthy public policies and healthy communities.

Purpose

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What is Public Policy?

Public policy is generally accepted as a broad framework of ideas and values within which decisions are taken and action, or inaction, is pursued by governments in relation to some issue or problem. (Brooks, 1989).

Healthy public policy brings together different perspectives from various sectors across communities, such that the decisions taken, and the action (or inaction) pursued improve the health and well-being of everyone. Healthy public policy intends that the decisions and actions made by governments are equitable and bring different voices and perspectives to the decision making and implementation processes.

When articulating what is involved in the policy making process, the most common, oft-cited policy process model is the linear model, also known as the stages model or the rational comprehensive model, originated by Laswell (1951). This model separates the policy process into several discrete units of analysis: agenda, alternatives, implementation, and evaluation. These sequential units are useful for analytical purposes, but they miss the more complex nature of how non-linear the process usually is.



Opportunities to navigate the Policy Making Process

Three Streams: PROBLEMS, POLICIES AND POLITICS

Drawing on John Kingdon's Agenda-Setting model, the policy making process can also be described as a process that is about the flow and timing of three streams: problems, policies, and politics. People recognize problems, they generate proposals or solutions for public policy changes, and they engage in civic actions such as voting and lobbying to respond to the problems. Policy change occurs when the three streams come together at a given point in time. In other words, opportunities for policy change arise when a solution is coupled with a problem. Add in a champion, or policy entrepreneur, that champions a particular solution and often it gets put on the agenda.

Research & Advocacy as an entry point

For some individuals and organizations, an opportunity to participate in the policy process is through research and/or advocacy. These opportunities are often part of what is referred to as **the policy community**, relevant players in a local community, a national government or committed to a particular issue, through an issue community or issue network.

- Research as data
- Research as ideas
- Research as argument

In her work, Carol Weiss (1977) noted that research as ideas acted as an “enlightenment” function or helped ideas to “percolate” with decision makers. An example of this is BCHC's work around “equity”. Bringing an “equity lens” on the research and decision-making work that is done around the province shines a light on how problems affect different groups of people differently and that the solutions require tailoring opportunities, power, and resources to fit the context. This ongoing work, will, over time, permeate the policy process space as it percolates through different communities across the province.

A second key question is how will the research be communicated to others? Part of that answer means understanding the key users of the research and how they intend to use the research. If you know who will use the research and how they intend to use it, researchers can tailor how that research is communicated to them. Different users have different needs and knowing how to reach them is an important step in the process.

The Champion

Policy entrepreneurs, or **champions**, are key users of research that advocate for particular solutions to problems and push for its attention on the policy agenda. It is not enough to know or have information about a problem, but someone needs to care about the issue and know how to make the seriousness of it real before much else happens:

“Without the presence of an entrepreneur, the linking of the streams may not take place. Good ideas lie fallow for lack of an advocate. Problems are unsolved for a lack of a solution. Political events are not capitalized for lack of inventive and developed proposals”¹.

Policy champions are also central figures for when policy windows open. They not only help to push their solutions onto the agenda when the opportunity arises, they are often the individuals who are able to anticipate those opportunities.

Policy Windows

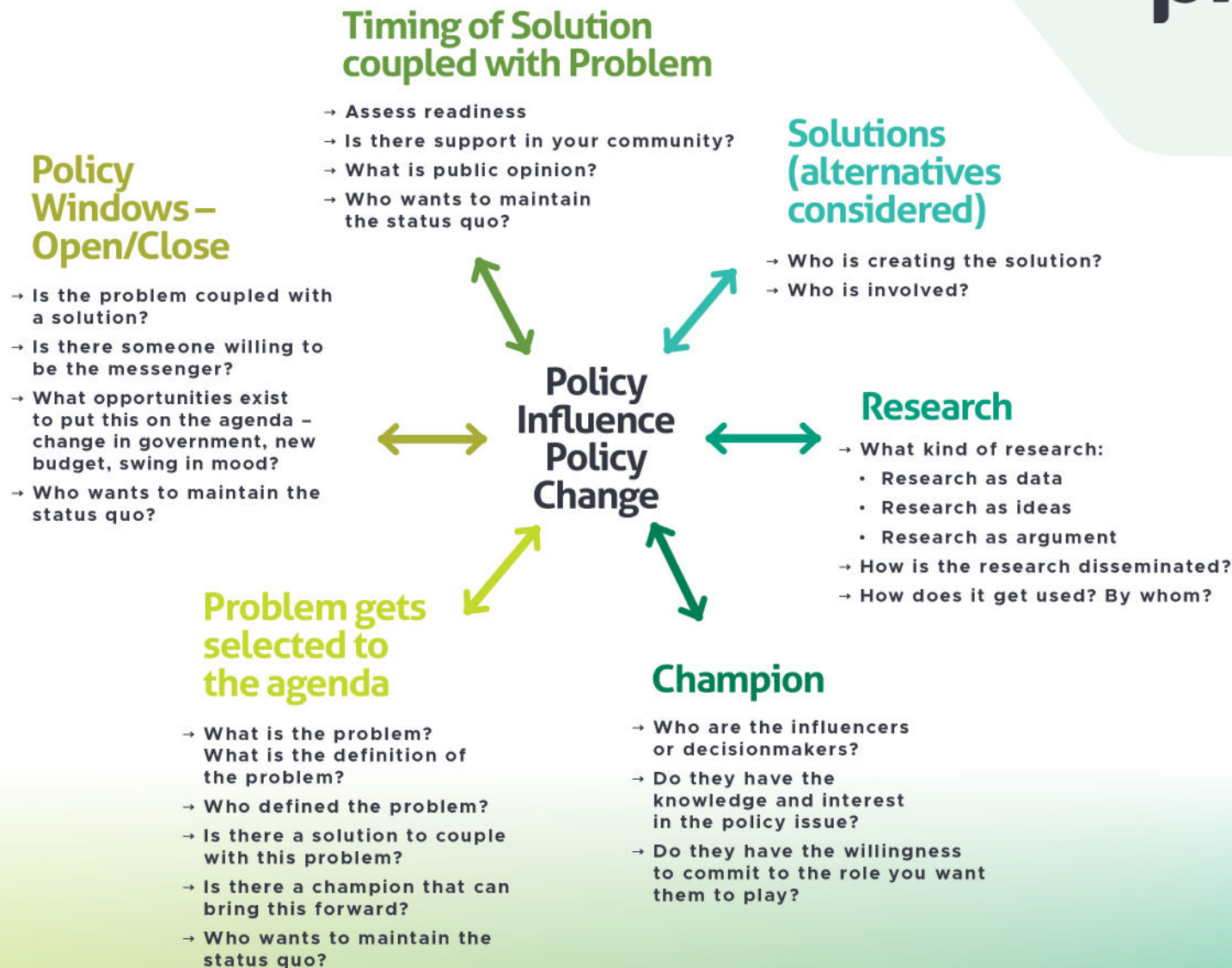
“As I see it, people who are trying to advocate change are like surfers waiting for the big wave. You get out there, you have to be ready to go, you have to be ready to paddle. If you’re not ready to paddle when the big wave comes along, you’re not going to ride it in”. (in Kingdon, 1984, p.173)

Once a problem is defined, and a solution is developed or established, there needs to be an opportunity for initiatives or changes to be adopted. These opportunities are called **policy windows** and they open because of changes to the political stream. Examples of policy windows are changes in government, a swing in national or local mood, budgets, or crises. Occasions such as these may allow for new alternatives to get serious considerations and for decisions to be made quickly. Champions are an important aspect of this part of the process since it is usually a strong advocate, with policy proposals who can get the attention of policymakers and put the problem on the agenda. However, once open, policy windows often do not stay open very long. If a coupling between a problem and a solution doesn’t occur, or if there is no support then the subject’s place on the agenda is short-lived, and the window closes.

It is the **timing** of different events within the three different streams, along with someone who is willing to invest time and energy to champion an idea or proposal in order for subjects to be placed on the decision agenda. If the idea or proposal is considered feasible and it coincides with the values of the policy community, the idea may in fact be adopted and policy change could occur.

¹ Kingdon, John. Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies. New York, Harpers Collins, 1984: p.191.

Navigating Healthy Public Policy



How Will You Know if there has been policy influence or policy change? What does it look like?

A framework for looking at whether there has been policy influence or actual change was developed and tested by the International Development Research Centre in 2002-2003². It was developed to help articulate what is policy influence, what does it look like and how will we know if policy influence has occurred. It also helps to capture changes that are important steps towards policy change but happen before actual change has occurred.

EXPANDING POLICY CAPACITIES:

- Improving the knowledge of certain actors
- Supporting recipients to develop innovative ideas
- Improving capabilities to communicate ideas
- Developing new talent for research and analysis

Expanding policy capacities is about building institutional support to do policy research, by strengthening abilities to assess and communicate ideas and knowledge or forging new talent to produce and analyze new knowledge. Supporting policy inquiry capacities is critical to advancing innovation and knowledge towards healthy public policies.

BROADENING POLICY HORIZONS:

- Providing opportunities for networking/learning within the jurisdiction or with colleagues elsewhere
- Introducing new concepts to frame debates, putting ideas on the agenda, or stimulating public debate
- Educating researchers and others who take up new positions with broader understanding of issues
- Stimulating quiet dialogue among decision makers

Research and new knowledge can broaden policy horizons by informing debates or introducing new concepts to frame debates. Putting an equity lens onto the policy debates re-frames how we consider issues and programs that include a wide array of voices and perspectives.

AFFECTING POLICY REGIMES:

- Modification of existing programs or policies
- Fundamental re-design of programs or policies



² This framework was developed by Prof. Evert Lindquist, School of Public Administration, University of Victoria at the request of IDRC. See Lindquist, Evert A. 2001. Discerning Policy Influence: Framework for a Strategic Evaluation of IDRC-Supported Research. Ottawa: Evaluation Unit, IDRC.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Want support or to learn more about improving health and well-being in your community?

Health authorities can support local governments by providing advice and expertise, resources for local government staff and elected officials to develop healthy public policy, community health profiles, and opportunities to work together on joint healthy living actions. You may already have relationships with your health authority. If not, up-to-date contact information for your local health authority lead is available at



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