# Discerning Policy Influence: Framework for a Strategic Evaluation of IDRC-Supported Research

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September 1st, 2001

## Introduction

Understanding causal influence is difficult in the best of circumstances for <u>any</u> activity: it is an especially complex task to assess the impact and role of research on public policy-making. Such assessments are difficult, first, because of the intrinsic nature of research and related activities, and, second, because the goal is to achieve influence in dynamic processes with a multiplicity of actors. The challenge is even greater when one asks such questions about the impact of research in Southern contexts, since most of the precepts developed for analyzing research utilization and policy-making processes more generally have come from Northern scholars addressing issues in their home jurisdictions.

The purpose of this paper is to survey the academic literature pertinent to these questions and to develop a conceptual framework that will guide a strategic evaluation of the policy influence of IDRC-sponsored projects. Informing such a framework requires a wide-ranging review of several analytic approaches which includes writing on knowledge utilization, policy communities and networks, policy-oriented learning and conflict, and agenda-setting. This work, no matter how diverse and perhaps bewildering, nevertheless provides useful guidance, and need not lead to developing an overly complicated framework to guide the strategic evaluation. It is critical that readers and evaluators alike have a sufficiently nuanced understanding of how research and other activities might achieve policy influence in order to ask the right evaluative questions and to select pertinent case studies. In short, the IDRC strategic evaluation must be guided by a robust yet sufficiently refined framework that generates reasonable expectations about research and policy influence, develops an appropriate research design, and produces useful findings that can guide or illuminate future IDRC projects.

This paper is divided into seven parts. The first provides some general perspectives on themes that emerged in the knowledge utilization literature, which examined the relationship between research and public policy, and suggests that there be a broader focus on a range of activities embraced by the notion of "policy inquiry" and not simply research. The second and third parts introduce frameworks for mapping the multiplicity of actors that are involved in public policy, and accounting for differences in how those communities and networks are structured in different jurisdictions and sectors. The fourth part encourages observers to move beyond the formal titles of organizations and those that lead them, and to identify the actual capacities and informal relationships at play on specific issues. The fifth section is the longest, and explores the dynamics of policy communities and networks by introducing frameworks that account for external

influences, political and value-based competition among actors, the random nature of policy-making, and different modes of decision-making and their implied receptivity to different forms of policy inquiry. The sixth section reviews how policy networks can be reshaped by key actors inside and outside the jurisdiction in question. The final section distils these perspectives, identifies three clusters of questions to pose to project managers and other respondents, and offers recommendations to guide the methodology for the strategic evaluation.

## 1. Early Perspectives on Research and Public Policy

The question of how research relates to the policy-making process is not a new one. There has long been an interest in the challenges of conducting policy-relevant research, insinuating that work into governing processes, and discerning how influence obtains in indirect and subtle ways.

Social science research was originally undertaken to influence public policy in the United Kingdom and the United States; the purpose of collecting data in the 19th and early 20th centuries was to expose and to shed light on a variety of social and health problems, and to stimulate public debate. Even as the social sciences grew and gained credibility, many policy-makers remained suspicious of social science research; it had long been associated with reformist initiatives. It is worth noting that, not long after World War II, Lasswell felt compelled to refer to all disciplines and professions with relevance for governments as the "policy sciences of democracy" (Lasswell, 1951; de Leon, 1997).

Many social scientists, of course, were committed in academic and non-academic activities to making a difference in the world of action. Indeed, the social sciences were widely seen as having proved their value by assisting policy-makers in grappling with a startling range of policy, administrative, and operational challenges associated with World War II as well as managing its aftermath in Europe and North America. This, in many ways, set the stage for moving forward with the war on poverty programs in the United States and other countries during the late 1960s, as well as informing strategies for assisting developing countries. If not driven by the claims of social science research, these initiatives were at least justified with its rhetoric and prestige (Aaron, 1978). However, the perceived failure of social science advice in the developed and the developing worlds alike led to questioning and soul-searching about the efficacy and relevance of its claims.

These historical developments profoundly influenced how the relationship between social science research and policy-making was conceived by many observers. It also led to the emergence of a literature on "knowledge utilization", which was devoted to why social science research was not used, and proceeded on the presumption that such work ought to have direct value for policy-makers (Caplan, 1979; Lynn, 1978; Weiss, 1977). Its initial focus was on depicting, exploring, and explaining the distance between two communities: one comprised of social scientists (the "knowledge-producers") and the other of policy-makers (the "knowledge-consumers"), each with different, though not necessarily unrelated, overarching values and cultures. Much of this inquiry had as a starting point

the view that social science ought to be *directly* useful to policy-makers; it was informed by "engineering" models of information utilization, where the value of research was determined by its fit and timeliness for the decisions of policy-makers.

A watershed in the literature, however, was the insight of Weiss, who sought to uncover the alternative modes of influence of social science research. She argued that research was often not necessarily directly relevant to policy decisions, but could achieve influence in other important ways, namely by altering the language and perceptions of policy-makers and their advisors. Such change might occur less decisively, but would exert influence in a powerful manner over a longer period of time. Weiss referred to this perspective as the "enlightenment", where research achieved influence indirectly over time through the circulation and "percolation" of ideas and concepts, as opposed to timely, hard facts and robust theories to guide policy interventions.

There also emerged greater awareness of the many intermediary institutions standing astride the so-called knowledge producers and knowledge consumers, and that these boundaries were increasingly permeable. First, Heclo (1978) argued that the careers of many policy analysts were increasingly decoupled from specific institutions; acknowledged experts on certain policy issues, moved with great frequency from one institutional base to another inside and outside government. Second, Lindquist (1990) identified a "third community" of organizations inside and outside government neither comprised of policy-makers nor committed fully to social science research per se, but rather, sharing a commitment to producing policy-relevant data, research or analysis, even though they might be located in the government or private sector, work for and target different audiences, and have varying degrees of willingness to put inquiry in the public domain (see Figure 1). Indeed, it was these organizations that provided the many "sites" where Heclo's analysts could work in succession and sometimes simultaneously.

A third and very important contribution to the literature was Paul Sabatier's advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier, 1998), which models how "policy-oriented learning" occurs in political environments. We will explore Sabatier's contributions later, but a general account of his contributions is in order at this point (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith,1993; 1999). Like Weiss, he acknowledged that as research findings moved into the policy-making process, they were shaped by, and had to contend with, competing beliefs and values. Sabatier further argued that observers should identify the competing "advocacy coalitions" in each policy domain, and determine whether policy research and analysis was associated with or independent from those coalitions. Indeed, he argued that research and related institutions could serve as moderating forces on policy conflict. Sabatier also argued that it would be difficult to assess the role of research or analysis in the policy process unless observers monitored a policy domain for at least a decade.

Figure 1 The Third Community & Network of Policy Actors
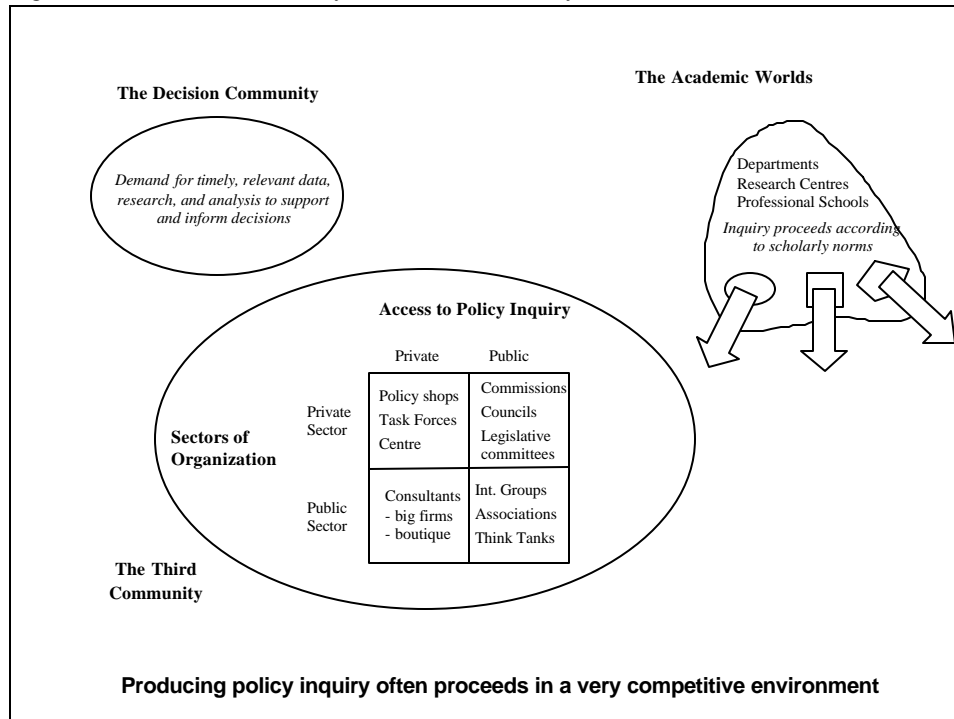


The close reader will have noted that I have expanded the scope of analysis beyond "research". Research is a word that is often used loosely: contributors to the literature will often substitute the terms "research" and "analysis" for each other, and, for example, many think tanks will identify themselves as "research institutes" when, in fact, they produce little, if any, research. Instead, they often are committed to producing analysis (and sometimes their own data) and organizing a host of events and issuing a stream of publications. To deal with this, Lindquist (1989; 1990) suggests that distinctions should be made about the kind of information that could be produced or sponsored by an organization – hence the categories of data, research and analysis – and urges observers to not take publications at face value and discern the actual value-added contributions. Many projects resulting in publications may not support new research, but simply (and sometimes very importantly) facilitate the transfer of ideas from other jurisdictions or policy fields,[1] or, more fundamentally, build capacity to conduct research sometime in the future. Moreover, a critical function of many research-related organizations – such as think tanks, government policy shops, and university research centers – is to foster the exchange and dissemination of ideas. It is worth noting that the objectives of publication and convocation can be achieved in new ways with web sites and electronic interchange, which greatly lowers the costs of transmitting information. As indicated in Figure 2, I have identified this broader constellation of activities as "policy inquiry".

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[1] We will return to the subject of "policy transfer" later in this paper, but for more detail, see Dolowitz and Marsh (2000), Ladi (2000), and Stone (2000a; 2000b).

Figure 2 Beyond Research to Account for the Range of Policy Inquiry
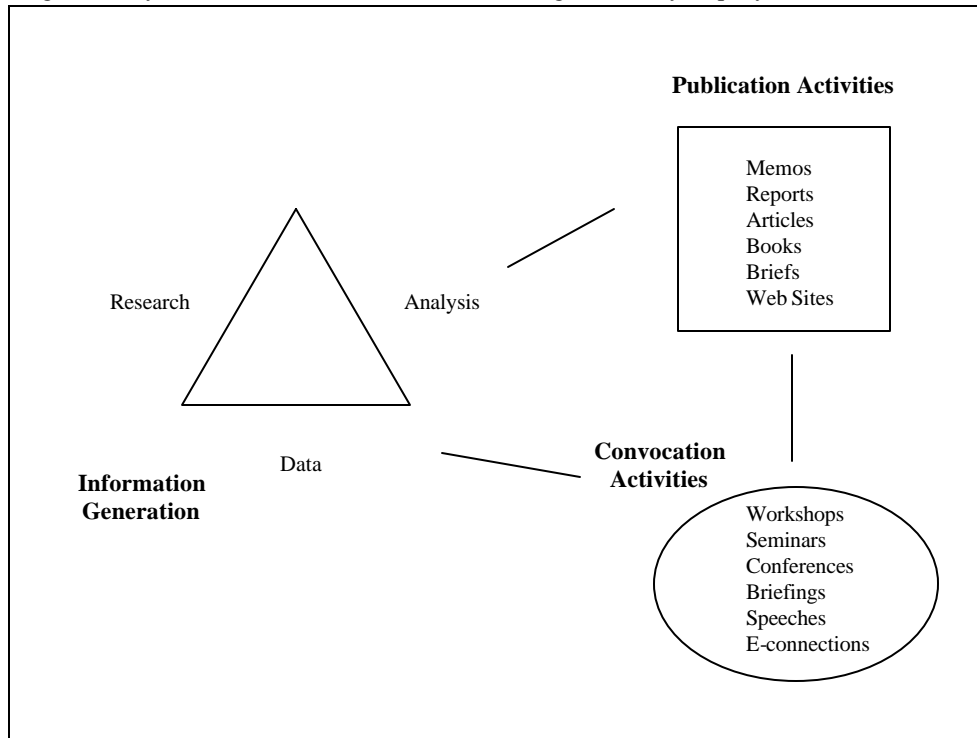


This brief review of the literature contains several important lessons that should be kept in mind when undertaking empirical research on the role of IDRC-sponsored research and other activities in policy-making. The strategic evaluation should be designed so that it:

- establishes precisely what the contributions and intentions of IDRC-sponsored projects before attempting to assess policy influence;
- accounts for the larger institutional environment in which research proceeds, namely the multiplicity of actors involved in policy-making;
- identifies a sufficiently long time frame with which to understand the influence of research;
- recognizes that values and the ongoing struggle over ideas and policy matters greatly in the commissioning, interpretation, and use of research.

In what follows, I review several different contributions to build a framework to guide a strategic evaluation on the policy influence of IDRC-sponsored research.


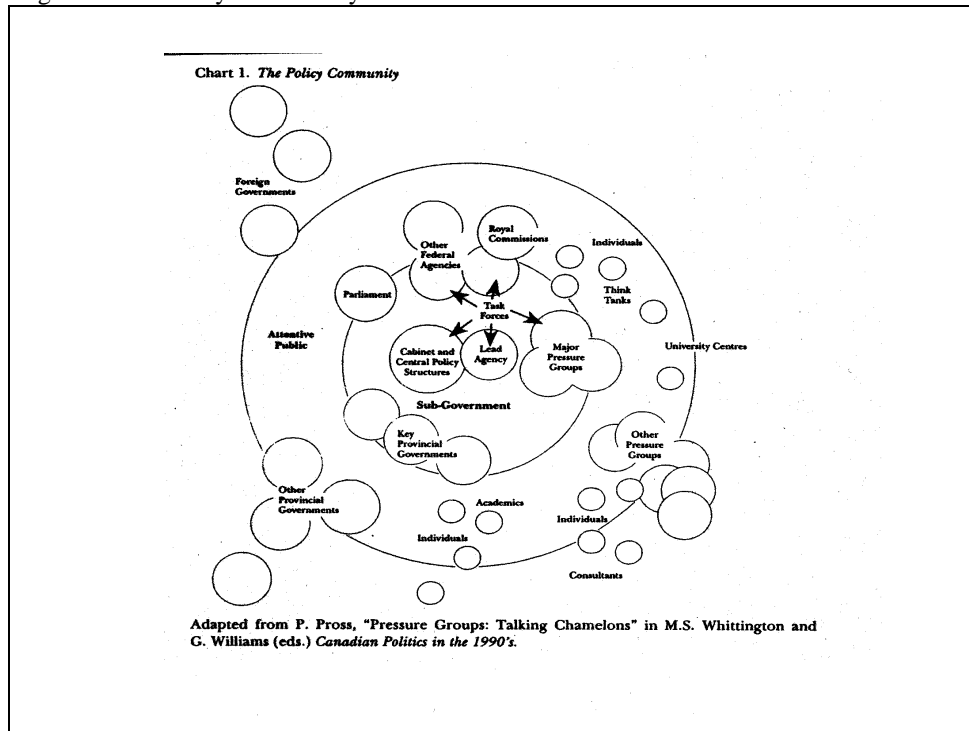## 2. Mapping the Multiplicity of Policy Actors

For practitioners and academic observers alike there has emerged awareness of the variety of actors seeking to influence public policy. Political scientists have long written about the activities of organized interests, some better organized and more powerful than others, under the rubric of pluralist theory. But even then the focus tended to be on major business, labour, and community interests and how they pressed claims on multiple centres of power inside governments whether at the national or local level.

The most significant change in the political landscape since the early 1970s has been the growing number of special interests, business and other types of associations, lobbyists, think tanks, and university-based research centres.  Equally important is that, regardless of size and capacities, more groups have access to important data and analytic expertise previously monopolized by governments, and to the media.  Such developments motivated Heclo to think about how experts moved within issue networks.  Although his approach reflected the larger, more complicated and permeable system of government found in the United States, similar developments were observed even in the ostensibly more closed systems of parliamentary governance such as Canada.  In his seminal work on organized interest groups and the policy process, Pross found it impossible not to account for the larger milieu in which groups attempted to exert influence – this led him to introduce the concept of "policy communities" to embrace all of the actors with an interest in a broad policy area such as health or transportation.

The policy community concept captured the same actors as Heclo did with his issue networks, but Pross made a distinction between those actors located in the "sub-
          and others in the "attentive public."  The sub-government was comprised of the influential departments in the governments that developed and implemented public policy, the interest groups exerting strong influence on those departments, and relevant international organizations.  The attentive public was comprised of all other actors with an abiding interest in monitoring and criticizing prevailing policy and outcomes.

Pross hypothesized that actors comprising the subgovernment will tend to support the status quo or support conservative approaches for change, reflecting their commitment and vested interest in existing approaches.  This view anticipated a later observation of Baumgartner and Jones (1993) that there are "policy monopolies" in each policy domain. On the other hand, Pross argued that the attentive public – comprised of smaller interest groups, less influential governments, academics, and journalists – would be not only more critical of the status quo, but they would be more likely to be the source of creative ideas for new policy approaches because they did not have a stake in preserving the status quo.

Figure 3 The Policy Community



Chart 1. *The Policy Community*

Adapted from P. Pross, "Pressure Groups: Talking Chamelons" in M.S. Whittington and G. Williams (eds.) *Canadian Politics in the 1990's*.

Delineating policy communities is essential for addressing the complexity of policy-making systems, but an important question concerns how this approach, which was developed to make sense of processes in large developed countries, can be applied to different contexts in developing countries. First, it must account for the fact that some IDRC projects are designed for local as opposed to national governance systems. Essentially, though, the approach is flexible: the "policy community" concept can describe the key players in a national government on a given issue or it could be adapted to consider the relevant players in a local community – as I discuss below, the critical matter is to understand where power lies and the inter-relationships between government and non-government actors. Second, the diagrams need to be modified to acknowledge the sometimes powerful influences of international organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, regional banks, donor organizations, etc. Indeed, the strength of the policy community approach is that it can easily indicate or "map" the presence of international organizations and donors and the fact that they exert strong influence on public policy through national or local government authorities in developing countries, and increasingly, through civil society organizations. Finally, in many Southern countries it may be important to recognize that the influence of familial and tribal ties. The best way to account for this, in my view, is to utilize the advocacy coalition approach, which will be described later in further detail.

Figure 3A Policy Communities Envisaged as Constellations of Organizations or Individuals
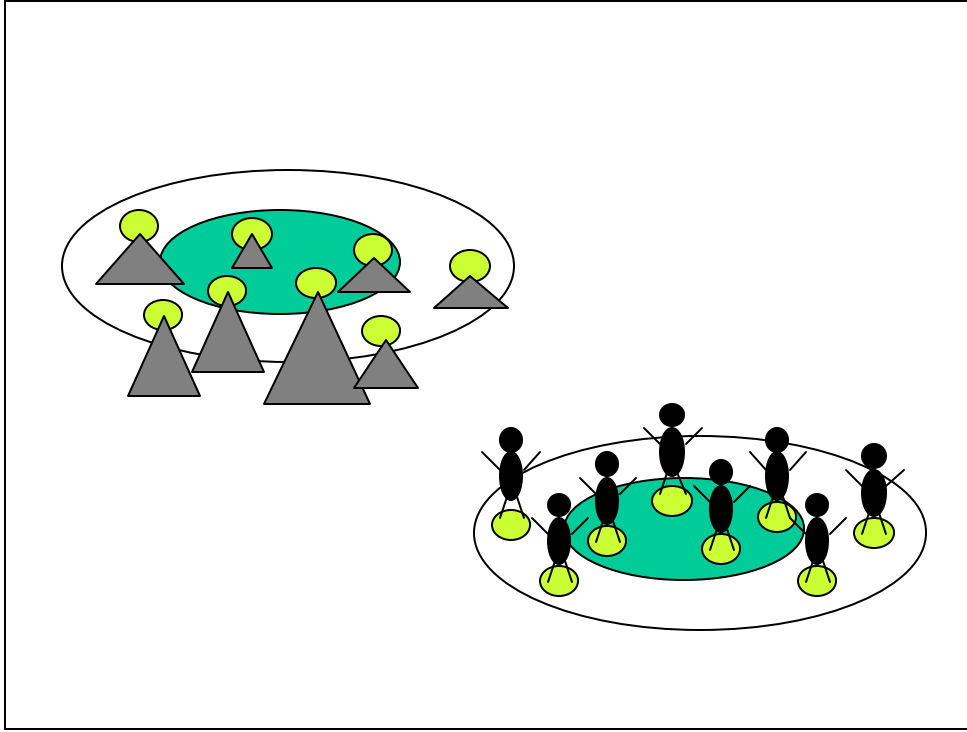


The preceding has several implications for the study of the policy influence of IDRC-sponsored research. A wide range of actors may be involved in policy-making, and they include:

- governmental actors such as ministers, senior public servants, and relevant departments and bureaus either at the national, provincial, local, and international levels.

- non-governmental actors such as firms and associations, labour groups, nonprofit and civil society organizations.

- a multiplicity of actors inside and outside the government involved in producing and disseminating policy inquiry pertinent to policy debates (academics, think tanks, university research centres, policy units, labs, media and journalists, etc.).

These sets of actors may overlap with each other (i.e., both governmental and non-governmental organizations will make/influence policy, deliver programs, and undertake policy inquiry) but the crucial point is that there are a wide range of possibilities, and it will be important to carefully model and characterize them. There can be multiple audiences and consumers for policy inquiry. And, for any issue in question, there will be many competitors seeking to gain access to policy-makers, not only within that policy

domain, but from outside, since there are a multitude seeking to divert the incredibly scarce time of policy-makers to supporting their cause.

## 3. Accounting for Differences in Policy Communities

If observers embrace the policy community approach, they will have a checklist that ensures they identify the full range of actors involved in a policy domain, whether at the local or national level, and a holistic way to embrace them as group. Pross' distinction between the subgovernment and the attentive public allows us to categorize actors with and without access to levers of power, yet suggests how actors in the attentive public might influence those with power. The difficulty with this approach, however, is that is too general; it does not address how the communities associated with different policy domains might differ from each other, nor does it account for how policy communities might evolve over time.

Lindquist (1992) reviewed two different approaches that remedy these gaps. The first comes from the literature on comparative public policy that seeks to account for how public policy and institutional relationships and capacities differ across jurisdictions. The second approach – the advocacy coalition framework perspective noted earlier – focuses on the clash between belief systems in policy networks and how that leads to policy change over time. Each has a different point of departure, but they complement each other in important ways, and facilitate accounting for the sometimes very different contexts in which policy research is supported, conveyed, and utilized in policy-making.
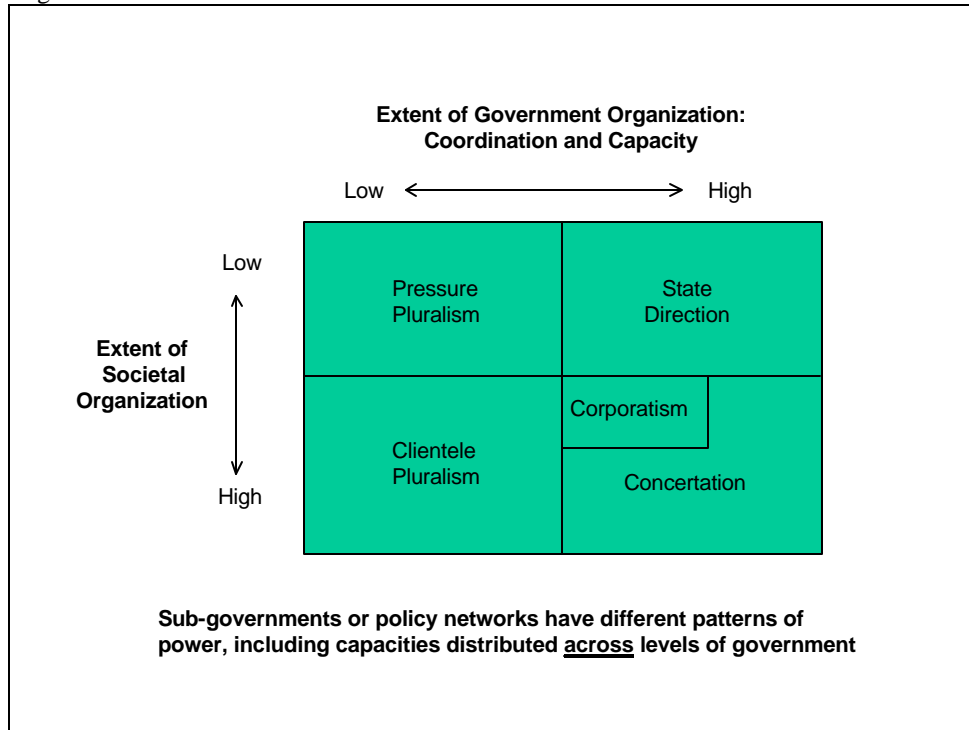
*From Policy Communities to Policy Networks*

During the 1980s and 1990s political scientists developed frameworks to account for how the structure of policy communities changed in different policy areas in the same jurisdiction, or how policy communities associated with the same policy domain (i.e., health) differed across jurisdictions. Although many different patterns in the structure of policy communities have been identified, as well as different terminology and typologies (see Howlett and Ramesh, 1995), it was concluded that it would not suffice to look at broad policy domains, but rather, to identify the particular relationships among the actors with authorities and expertise on specific policy issues.

If we were to delve into the field of health policy, we would find a different set of actors involved in the debate, design, and implementation of policy than if we examined transportation policy. But this can be taken a step further: even within the broad field of health policy we can find very different networks of actors on specific issues. The actors involved in "nutrition" may be quite different from those working on AIDS-related programs. Some actors in a policy community will be involved in many of the issues around which specific policy networks have formed and can be identified, but observers need to determine how central those issues are to the mission of that actor. Conversely, there will be certain actors who limit their involvement to one issue; they will emerge as part of policy networks that form around other issues that constitute the landscape of the broader policy domain.

Important studies by Atkinson and Coleman (1989) and Coleman and Skogstad (1990) on policy networks in Canada identified several possible configurations. Generally, they sought to account for variations in the relative capacities and autonomy of actors inside and outside government, and their ability to coordinate, develop coherent strategies across actors, and mobilize and sustain action. Lindquist (1992) summarized the possibilities in a simple chart (see Figure 4) according to whether the relative organizational capacity of state and non-state actors was high or low, or, in other words, whether state and non-state were dominant, or an equal match for each other in developing, designing, and implementing policy.

Figure 4

**Extent of Government Organization:
Coordination and Capacity**

Low ← → High

**Extent of
Societal
Organization**

Low

| | |
|---|---|
| Pressure Pluralism | State Direction |
| Clientele Pluralism | Corporatism |
| | Concertation |

High

**Sub-governments or policy networks have different patterns of
power, including capacities distributed _across_ levels of government**

Another way to interpret Figure 4 is that it depicts a range of patterns for the *subgovernments* identified by Pross, even the typology has little to say about the linkages and capacities of actors typically found in the attentive public (which will be discussed later). When reviewing specific projects, the focus should not try to be on whether the network in question can be cleanly labeled; rather, it is more important to develop a good sense of how government organizational capacities change in comparison to similar cases under review, and how these relative capacities change over a decade or more. If this proves difficult, then it may help to reflect on how the authorities and expertise on a given policy issue compare to practice in other countries, localities or sectors.

*From Policy Communities to Advocacy Coalitions*

Rather than focus on structures and relative capacities, Sabatier and his colleagues have sought to comprehend policy communities in terms of beliefs and values, and to model important structures – advocacy coalitions – as flowing from the bonds and relationships of actors who share similar values and beliefs. These coalitions, which may be tightly or

loosely coupled, are comprised of government agencies, interest groups, associations, think tanks, academics, university research centres, journalists, and prominent individuals who more or less share common world views and generally agree on policy solutions.

Sabatier predicts that two to four advocacy coalitions can be found in every policy community, with one emerging as the dominant coalition controlling the important levers of power. *The difference, however, between his notion of the dominant coalition and Pross' subgovernment is that the former also includes actors located in the attentive public.* Thus, certain think tanks and academics, for example, will have greater currency when like-minded individuals assume positions of importance in the central institutions controlled by the dominant coalition, whether they be local, national or international organizations.

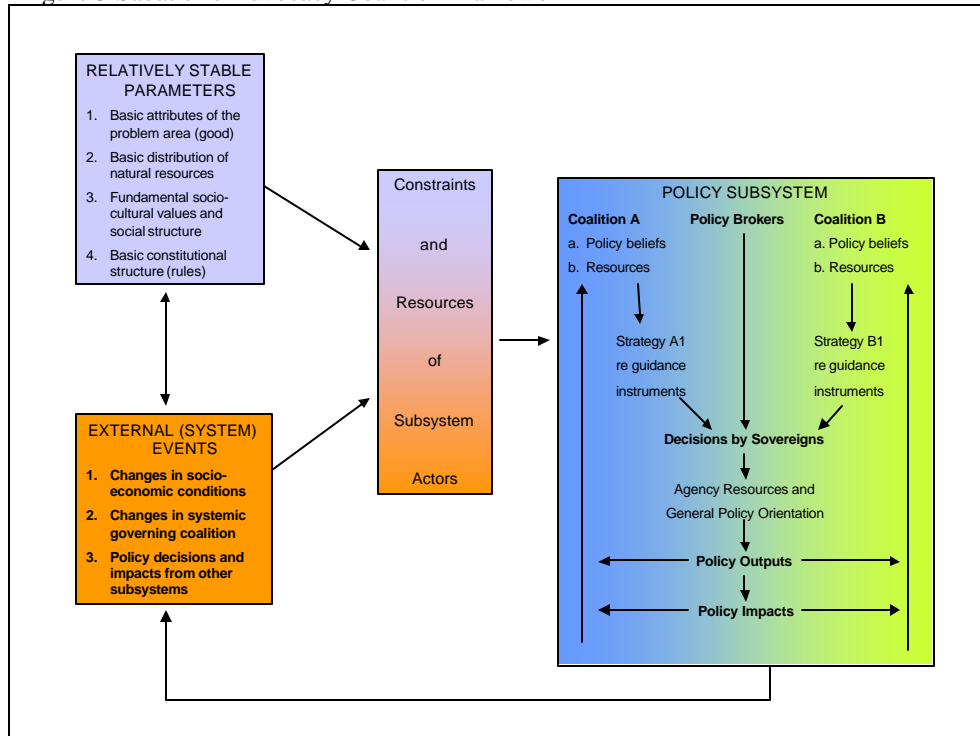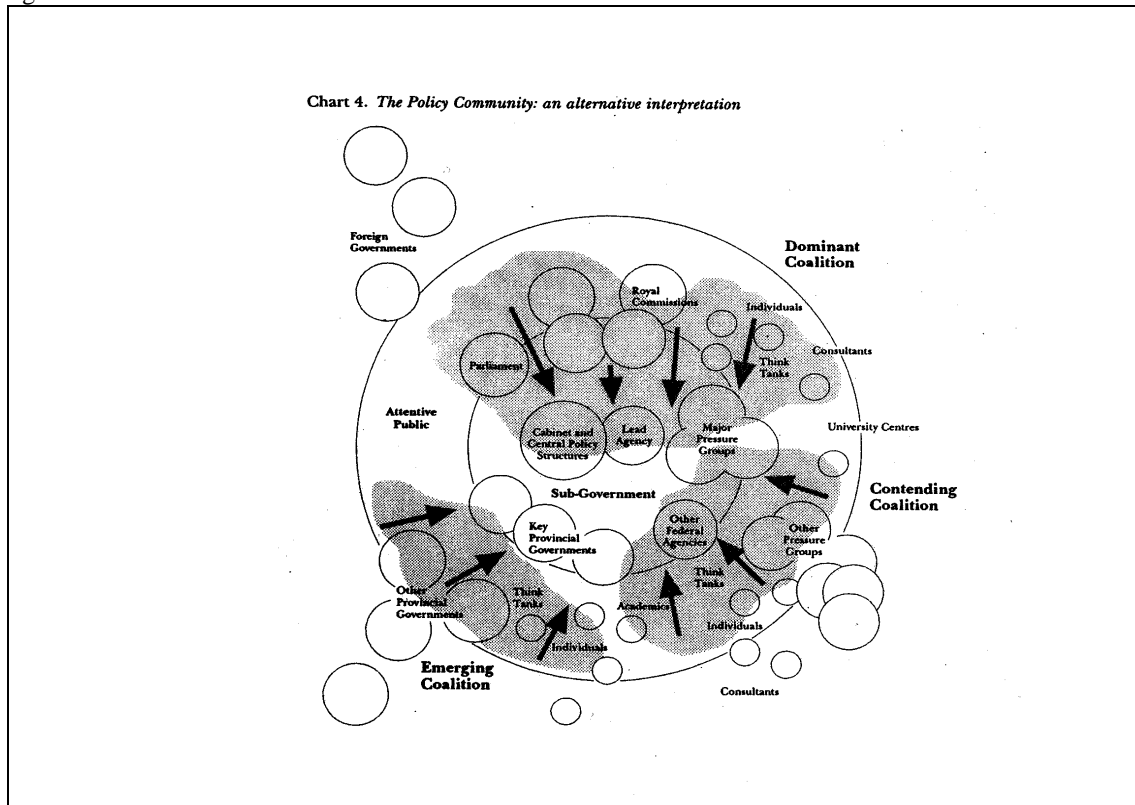Figure 5 Sabatier's Advocacy Coalition Framework

Figure 6



Chart 4. *The Policy Community: an alternative interpretation*

At the centre of Sabatier's formulation is the precept that advocacy coalitions are formed around a core set of beliefs and values that are very stable and not easily shaken. These core beliefs comprise a fundamental orientation towards the world, and form the basis for beliefs about problems and a favoured program of interventions in particular policy fields. However, Sabatier's framework allows for policy actors -- individuals and organizations -- to alter their stance on policy solutions, which he casts as the "secondary aspects" of their belief systems. Hence, for reasons other than what Pross and others have offered, Sabatier sees an inherent conservatism in policy-making in policy communities. Members of the competing advocacy coalitions will not relinquish core values and beliefs, but movement can occur on items of secondary importance, perhaps in response to careful studies or to compelling anecdotal evidence.

A distinctive feature of Sabatier's framework is the potentially significant role he sees for researchers in facilitating policy learning. He suggests that, while conflict is pervasive in policy communities, research findings can have a moderating influence on what otherwise might be shrill and nonproductive debates. Research can assist advocacy coalitions to produce better arguments, and conversely, can be used to test the claims of opponents. An important issue for Sabatier, and later Lindquist (1992), is whether the right fora for reviewing research findings and testing the claims of advocacy coalitions actually exist, particularly as policy challenges evolve and require new forms of expertise. Indeed, an important role for IDRC, international organizations or donor agencies might be to stimulate and sponsor the creation of such forums. Likewise, the fora for debate and policy transfer (Ladi, 2000) could be located outside the country in

question, and an objective would be to link designated individuals or organizations with international epistemic communities.

The advocacy coalition approach should be used in combination with the policy network approach; it is possible to see contending coalitions, however well organized, grappling with the issues associated with specific policy networks. Competing values and beliefs, however, cannot be the whole story; equally important are the interests and capacities of policy actors in policy networks. Observers must understand those concrete realities, but also see how beliefs and values, or at least the policy programs flowing from them, can change over time. The goal of funding may not be to directly influence public policy, but rather, to improve the quality of debate and evidence, or, more specifically, to strengthen the analytic capabilities of a particular non-dominant advocacy coalition by supporting certain individuals or organizations.

## 4. Distributed Policy Capacities and Informal Networks

So far, our focus has been on thinking better about how policy communities and their constituent organizational components work. However, to more fully understand how research influences policy-making, we need a finer-grained understanding of the capacities and interrelationships of those organizations. Below we consider how organizational capacities are distributed across policy networks, and how ideas and information get shared, increasingly, around the world.

A difficult challenge for analysts is dealing with the reality of fragmented jurisdiction within and across governments. It is well understood that governments are always comprised of a multitude of departments competing for resources, political attention, and responsibility for implementing public policies.[2] However, departments are often comprised of many smaller bureaus with their own competing interests and capacities, and, for those who attempt to assess policy influence, this may be the most crucial level for developing insight. *It does not make sense to discuss the capacity of a department on an issue if, indeed, one or two comparatively small bureaus are the only units driving the story*. The question of capacity is further complicated if different levels of government have certain departments with bureaus wrestling with a policy problem. The same applies for international organizations, universities, business, labour, think tank, and other civil society organizations. Thus, analysts must identify the size of organizations and relevant bureaus, and determine how they connect to outside interests and well as their own "host" organization.

Sabatier's advocacy coalition framework leads us to examine the evolving alliances among these bureaus and non-governmental organizations holding similar or shared values. This is particularly important when a "dominant" coalition has access to the levers of power in a parliamentary context and can extend resources and access to power to actors outside the state. This, too, is linked to Heclo's notion of issue networks, a concept designed to focus attention on the movement of experts across traditional

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[2] See Allison (1971) for his well-known "bureaucratic politics" model, one of three models he outlined utilized to explain policy decisions.

boundaries, who work for organizations in succession, or even simultaneously in contractual and advisory roles while remaining esconsed in a home organization. As the capacities of government bureaus and actors outside government (particularly groups, associations, research centres or think tanks) wane or expand, the relative power and momentum of interests within and across advocacy coalitions may change as well.

In addition, we must emphasize (along with Kingdon and Sabatier) the often subtle, but critically important, influence that can be exercised through informal networks of leaders and researchers in policy networks. Such influence may affect pivotal hiring decisions in government bureaus and even organizations outside government, as well as who gets invited to participate in forums, advisory panels, and contracted research.

Personal and professional networks extend in other directions. Sometimes the most important involve colleagues in different jurisdictions who share similar values, or hold similar positions. Haas has refereed to such networks as "epistemic communities." Indeed, access to international institutions and fora can be useful and potent ways to circumvent either the chain of command of public bureaucracies or the conservatism of policy networks; pronouncements from respected international authorities can prod governments to action. Epistemic communities may also share information about strategies and tactics for advancing the claims and programs of an advocacy coalition. Indeed, many IDRC projects may be less concerned about sponsoring new research to be injected in a local community or national policy network, and more concerned with "policy transfer" (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Ladi, 2000; Stone, 2000a) – that is, facilitating the building of relationships and capacities among key individuals and organizations, perhaps associated with certain advocacy coalitions, so that they can avail themselves of ideas and practices outside their immediate jurisdiction, and wisely interpret that information. This important function reinforces the need to adopt the broader concept of "policy inquiry" which, in addition to its emphasis on the production of different kinds of information and publications, also draws attention to the suite of convocation activities, which may involved putting actors in face-to-face or on-line contact.

## 5. Policy-Making and the Dynamics of Policy Communities

This section reviews different perspectives on how change obtains in policy networks. The first reviews how external forces can affect policy networks, while the second perspective considers the extent to which forces within policy networks might lead to incremental or more fundamental change. The third perspective emphasizes the process of agenda-setting and the randomness of change, which is important for considering why some decisions get made and why others do not. This last perspective also explicitly models the role of social science researchers inside and outside universities, which provides a useful segue and point of departure for the final section of the chapter that more fully considers how research and research institutions are connected to the policy process.

*External Influences on Policy Networks*

There appears to be a general consensus in the literature that, unless external pressures force dominant interests to change policy, the status quo will prevail. As noted earlier, it is presumed that the dominant coalition or the subgovernment has little incentive to adjust policy arrangements that remain favourable to their interests. However, several scholars – Sabatier in particular – have argued that different types of external pressures may provide an important impetus for change in policy networks. They include the following.

*Changes in government.* New governments have effects extending beyond a particular policy network. However, in exercising the prerogatives of power, new governments portend the arrival of new political leaders (ministerial and agency head appointments) and often at the most senior levels of public sector bureaucracies. New governments will bring a different ideological cast towards a broad range of issues, and attach different degrees of importance to specific issues; this may lead to an openness to change and willingess to entertain different ideas. Relatedly, new governments may turn to different sources of policy advice, and thus increase the influence of certain bureaus inside government as well as groups and researchers outside the state. Finally, the arrival of new governments may influence the trajectory of negotiations among levels of government within a jurisdiction, as well as with international organizations and donor agencies.

*Changes in the economy and technology.* We take for granted that a more global economy and information technologies are profoundly affecting different sectors and regions of the domestic economy. Some of these changes may get accelerated due to government decisions to introduce freer trade regimes and to regulate sectors in different ways, sometimes at the behest of the IMF, the World Bank, and other international actors. Expansionary or tight fiscal policies will affect the extent to which resources can be allocated to specific policy domains. If there are dramatic shifts in the international and domestic economy there could well be significant implications for a particular policy network, which may alter the capacities and relative power among key interests, and lead to policy change. The proliferation of information technology has significantly lowered the cost of transmitting information and ideas around the world, and even though members of all advocacy coalitions should have more or less the same access, sustained exposure to ideas and experience elsewhere may shift, over time, the conventional wisdom within policy communities.

*Policy spillovers.* Pressures for change in policy networks can also arise from developments in other policy domains (Kingdon,1984). For example, structural adjustment agreements negotiated with international lending institutions can have profound impacts on public policies in areas that are not the focus of negotiations. Another possibility is that trends in other policy domains are sufficiently significant so as to have economic, social, or technological implications for related policy networks. A current example is the impact that developments in energy markets are having on environmental policies. A third possibility is that the reforms and experience of other jurisdictions with similar policy challenges can serve as models to emulate or avoid.

Finally, Hoberg and Morawski (1997) have shown that policy networks can "converge" or collide as issues start to overlap or merge with others. This suggests the interesting possibility that the cultures of previously unrelated networks could clash, and lead to uncharted and perhaps uneasy relationships among key actors.

External influences may occur in combination with other forces, so it will be important for observers to parse out how, over time, different influences manifested themselves in each of the policy networks. In other words, observers should be careful not to attribute influence to one factor if other, more fundamental, forces were at work.

*Changing Policy Networks from Within: Conflict, Learning, Anticipation*

Although key contributors to the literature agree that external forces are the most likely cause of policy change within networks, they do not believe that this is the only source of change. Indeed, the advocacy coalition framework developed by Sabatier and his colleagues (see Figure 5) was developed to model how, without significant external pertubations, research might be utilized in environments of ongoing conflict, learning, and policy change in policy networks.

Sabatier argues that the actors comprising advocacy coalitions have competitive urges to continually search for new evidence, new arguments, and new strategies and tactics that can translate their beliefs and proposed programs of action into government policy. His view, though, is that such maneuvering will typically be countered by reactive as well as anticipatory responses from competing coalitions. Sabatier argues that such struggle will not sway opponents in the other advocacy coalitions from core beliefs and broad programs for change. However, there may be movement on "secondary" issues, where perhaps there is not strong and wholesale agreement among coalition members about the need to continue with the status quo, or there may be new evidence or experience that will lead to the softening of previously hard positions. When such change occurs, it suggests that a degree of policy learning has occurred.

The advocacy coalition approach puts considerable emphasis on competition and conflict as the drivers for investing in new evidence, arguments, and strategies in policy networks. However, Lindquist (1992) has suggested that there may be evidence of co-operative strategies across advocacy coalitions in response to critical events (such as a disaster or scandal) or in anticipation of significant change. This would not mean that the difference in interests would disappear, but rather, that they would be surmounted for a time or that there might be new forms of debating and resolving conflicts.

It is in this connection we should consider recent findings that suggest significant change can occur from with policy networks. Coleman, Skogstad and Atkinson (1996) and Lertzman, Rayner and Wilson (1996) suggest that policy networks can make significant adjustments in policy regimes in an anticipatory manner without waiting for the onslaught of external forces. However, this is not unrelated to external forces: the willingness of dominant coalitions and subgovernments to rethink their current positions and to countenance significant change arises from foresight and concluding that the

prospects of maintaining the status quo in an evolving environment is likely very negative.

*Policy Decisions as Chance: Agendas, Streams, and Policy Entrepreneurs*

When thinking about the impact of IDRC-sponsored projects, it is important to bear in mind that there are many other problems and causes seeking the attention of governments and the public. Accordingly, part of the framework should embrace how issues associated with specific projects may move up or down the agenda of local or national governments. We have acknowledged that external and internal forces are at play, but what really determines whether alternatives to existing policy regimes get serious attention by policy-makers, and indeed, whether new policies actually get adopted?

Perhaps the most useful contribution on this subject is the work of John Kingdon (1984) that models the agenda-setting process, which should be seen as distinctive from, though related to, policy-making. In addition to acknowledging internal and external sources of influence on policy networks, Kingdon argued there is always an element of chance and randomness in the policy-making process, and that a complete model should explain not only why some alternatives do not move higher onto the agendas of governments and the public, but also why, even when they do, they might not get adopted as policy. Kingdon builds his framework around "garbage can" models of decision-making, identifying three streams of activity that attempt to move alternatives higher on the agenda. They include:

- *the problem stream*. This stream of activity embraces the work of citizens, groups and journalists who seek to have issues recognized as genuine social problems of importance. Problems are ever-present, but some may already be monitored, so that significant changes in the number or rates associated with a given problem may be sufficient to spark concern in the media. Critical incidents – such as a death, scandal or a failure to secure a major opportunity – may trigger interest in the problem. Finally, other problems which garnered considerable attention may get resolved, or lose the interest of the public and the media. Energy may thus be directed to other problems which, though not having worsened, nevertheless move more easily up the agenda.

- *the policy stream*. Ideas about what constitutes a significant problem, and what might provide the best solution, are always in state of flux. Kingdon suggests that the leading experts on policy inside and outside government regularly debate and keep informed about the latest developments and possibilities on the national and international stage. There is a rolling – though always evolving – sense of what stands as the best advice at a given time. Thus, when governments take power, or external events demand new strategies, it is these general conclusions that will be offered and considered, even if there is not unanimity among experts.

- *the political stream*. Elections are regular occurrences in federal states, and thus there is always a shifting balance in power. Moreover, the stock of governments and political leaders wax and wane, as does the public interest in certain issues. Political leaders are always seeking new issues and causes to champion, which

may make better sense at different stages over the life of a government. When a political leader puts their shoulder behind a problem and alternative, an issue can more quickly move up the policy agenda.

- *Policy windows*. Kingdon argues that a single stream rarely single-handedly moves an issue to top of the policy agenda <u>and</u> result in a policy decision. Rather, he argues that there must be a *confluence* of at least two of the streams in order for a policy to obtain; there needs to be sufficient political interest and energy available to match a suitable alternative to a problem and to convert an alternative into a decision. Kingdon ascribes considerable importance to the opening, however briefly, of "policy windows" – such as budgets, government crises, international agreements, or priority-setting exercises – can provide the occasions for a new alternative to get very seriously considered and for decisions to be taken quickly.

In short, timing and chance are critical factors in this formulation; problems may worsen objectively, but without saleable solutions or leaders and a public willing to embrace the cause, the problems are unlikely to receive more than passing attention. Important "problems" can be shunted around and "decisions" taken in very different sites. The possibilities include the office of political leaders, cabinets, central agencies, agreements with international organizations or donor agencies, regulatory agencies, courts, international tribunals, and intergovernmental conferences. The point is that which site emerges for critical decisions itself can be quite random, and even more interestingly, their interest in research can vary enormously. This perspective is not inconsistent with the idea that external influences can have significant impacts on the trajectory of policy networks. On the other hand, it could be equally possible that, due to the larger swirling of events, ideas generated from within a particular policy network may receive greater exposure if they seem to address an emerging problem or challenge, or fit the needs of a government at a certain time.

The notion that significant change can occur infrequently, and by chance, was embraced by scholars such as Baumgartner and Jones (1993). They argue one can often observe stability in policy regimes that typically obtains from policy monopolies and what they refer to as negative feedback loops. However, drawing on Kingdon, they suggest that there are circumstances where positive feedback loops are at play, which can create "punctuated equilibria" in policy domains. As Etzioni (1967) once described, these are defining moments where fundamental decisions are made and the policy governing a network is put on another course.

Figure 7 Agenda-Setting and Public Policy
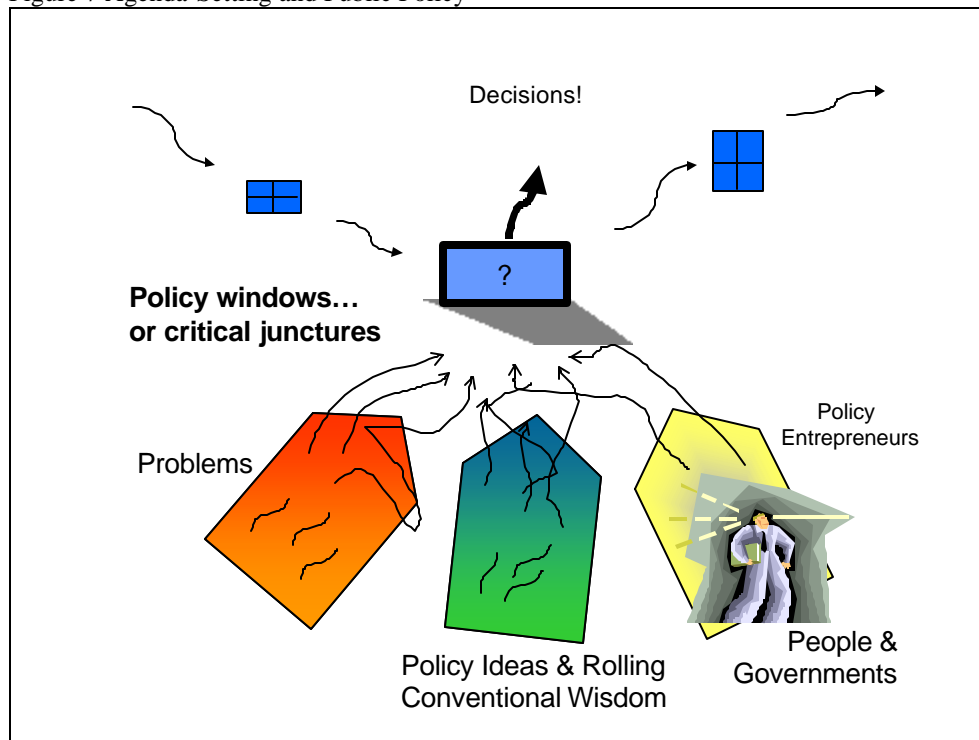


Models of agenda-setting are important for this study because the opening of "policy windows" – large or small – occur relatively infrequently, but they can constitute decisive opportunities. It confirms what a lot of policy advocates and entrepreneurs know: they ready themselves for opportunities that may arise, but often do not occur (Feldman, 1989). Readiness, rather than achieving impact with each event or study, may be a more important goal. For those sponsoring policy inquiry and building capacity in developing countries, an objective is to increase chances so that supported individuals and organizations can take advantage of policy windows, or to identify ways to create windows, which, in turn, highlights the critical role of policy entrepreneurs.

*Decision Regimes and Policy Inquiry*

A final factor to consider is the disposition of policy-makers to use policy inquiry. Lindquist (1988; 1990) has argued that organizations or networks, for that matter, are often in different decision modes – routine, incremental, or fundamental. Each involves a different level of scrutiny and debate over the integrity of its policy underpinnings: *routine* decision regimes focus on matching and adapting existing programs and repertoires to emerging conditions, but involves little debate on its logic and design, which is built into the programs and repertoires; *incremental* decision-making deals with selective issues as they emerge, but does not deal comprehensively with all constituent issues associated with the policy domain; and *fundamental* decisions are relatively infrequent opportunities to re-think approaches to policy domains, whether as result of crisis, new governments, or policy-spillovers. Where fundamental decisions are concerned, it is important to note that that they are anticipated and followed by incremental or routine regimes. There is a connection to this line of thinking with the

agenda-setting model described just above. Decisions emanating from the "choice opportunities" that arise as policy windows open, however briefly, may involve either limited or significant change, or perhaps none at all.

Different modes of decision-making should have implications for the number of actors in the policy community (in the subgovernment and attentive public) actively involved in addressing issues associated with that policy area, and the receptivity for different types of information produced by actors inside and outside government. Here it is useful to invoke the distinctions noted earlier about broad categories of information – data, analysis, and research – as well as the other elements of policy inquiry. Figure 8 summarizes the argument: routine decision regimes are designed to gather data and analysis that feeds and modifies pre-designed parameters and routines, and therefore will not be receptive to research that challenges their underpinnings; incremental decision regimes are receptive to "policy analysis" that identifies alternatives and compromises that address selective issues that do not involve wholesale rethinking of existing policies; and, either in anticipation, or as a result, of fundamental decisions, there should be more interest in research and debate that directly addresses and even challenges the underpinnings and logic of existing decision regimes because of the scope of the decision under consideration.

The implications of this formulation, however elegant, are important. If one believes that the vast majority of decision-making in a policy area over time is routine or incremental, then there is a built-in bias against the use of research by policy-makers. There will be greater interest in useful data and analysis that deals with incremental issues as they arise, and the findings from ongoing research must achieve influence through enlightenment and percolation. Conversely, the greatest demand for, and receptivity to, research comes in anticipation of fundamental policy decisions, or following sharp regime shifts. We should not be surprised, then, that many policy-makers often indicate that, in the normal course of their duties, they do not find research or policy inquiry that grapples with big questions all that relevant. However, as the pace of change accelerates in many policy areas, it is not surprising that we see more policy-makers calling for research and analysis that challenges or embraces clusters of issues in a given policy domain. When reviewing how IDRC-sponsored projects led to policy influence, it is important to identify "defining moments" or fundamental decisions, and what mode of decision-making existed as a project was designed.

Figure 8 How Consensus on the Policy Base, Number of Actors, and Type of Information Should Logically Change for Different Decision Regimes

| Decision Regime | Routine | Incremental | Fundamental | *Emergent* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Status of Consensus On the Policy Base** | Intact | Policy base largely intact but marginal issues arise | Core principles of policy base open to scrutiny | *No consensus – the field is wide open and open to development of a broad vision* |
| **Number of Actors Involved in Decision Processes** | A few actors with responsibility to implement policy by policy-makers | A few policymakers with a stake in the marginal issue | All policymakers and actors potentially affected or concerned about a significant change | *Relatively small number at the outset* |
| **Type of Information Sought** | Data that can inform existing routines, and analysis to determine when to switch to other routines. | Analysis on selected issues – the method of successive limited comparisons for the issues at hand. | Information on fundamental variables, and that probes underlying assumptions. Will also require analysis, data of considerable scope. | *Inquiry at a broad level for perspective, but work proceeds on selective issues* |

This approach, though, *presumes* that a "policy network" and a "decision regime" of one kind or another already exists. IDRC projects often involve identifying new niches or building capacities or networks where none previously existed. Accordingly, Figure 8 has been expanded to embrace the possibility of an "emergent" decision regime. Interestingly, it would initially share with the routine decision regime the engagement of relatively small numbers of actors, but simultaneously would be accompanied by a broad vision of possibilities for the policy domain similar to what we might associate with fundamental decision regimes. Due to limited capacities and resources, however, such a project might involve a series of publications, events and projects dealing with incremental bits of the larger problem or opportunity that needs to be addressed.

## 6. Reshaping and Creating Policy Networks and Advocacy Coalitions

We have already acknowledged that policy networks and research communities can be affected by external events, and the approaches we have reviewed presume that external forces are the primary means for securing non-incremental change in policy. However, actors within policy communities also struggle to shape the interactions and structure of different policy networks and their constituent advocacy coalitions.

An early, interesting, oversight of the literature on policy communities and networks was that, notwithstanding the presence of politics and competition among interests inside and

outside government, relatively little attention has been directed to how key actors seek to reshape the structure of policy networks and influence the field on which actors compete. Lindquist (1996) and Kickert et al (1997) consider the instruments policy-makers can utilize in order to influence the workings of policy networks. They include the following:

- Provision or withdrawal of resources to certain organizations

- Provision or withdrawal of resources to a coalition or entire network

- Provision or withdrawal of information to certain organizations

- Provision or withdrawal of access to policy development, consultation processes, or advisory roles to certain organizations

- Provision or withdrawal of formal charters or status to certain organizations

- Appointments of ministers or senior officials to certain organizations

- Creation of mediating organizations or professional fora to enhance learning within or across advocacy coalitions

Over time, such interventions – employed in isolation or in combination – can greatly alter the effectiveness and reputation of some organizations, and perhaps alter the relative power within and across advocacy coalitions. In the context of IDRC's strategic evaluation, a priority should be to identify whether the objective behind projects consisted of investing in critical research capacities inside or outside government, or strengthening connections with experts outside the community or country in question.

One might presume that such strategic instruments will only be wielded by the ministers of a government in power, or of the dominant coalition of a policy network. However, we must recall that, in some policy networks, key non-state actors, such as international organizations or strong interests in civil society, may exercise considerable influence over government decisions, and thus may seek to continually influence the balance of power and flow of resources in the network to their own advantage. On the other hand, there is a possibility that leaders of actors who are not members of a dominant coalition may nevertheless succeed in increasing the capacity of some organizations or even securing improved access to those who make decisions. Often, building relatively strong "capacity" may not be a daunting task if little to no capacity exists.

Finally, it is worth mentioning, once again, the key role of policy entrepreneurs in furthering not only change, but also structural change, which was an important part of Kingdon's analysis of agenda-setting. Policy entrepreneurs are usually advocates inside or outside the government who are committed to certain causes or solutions, and are adept at reading the environments inside and outside government. They may or may not be highly placed in one of the key organizations, which may or may not be part of the dominant coalition. However, they seem to sense when policy windows are likely to open, or at the very least, are well prepared to react quickly when they do open. As we have seen, by good positioning, such individuals can take advantage of a confluence of

events to secure significant change in policy networks.  Accordingly, we should seek to identify which individuals were pivotal in bringing about policy change in each case.

## 7. Conclusion: Framework for Studying IDRC-Sponsored Projects and Policy Influence
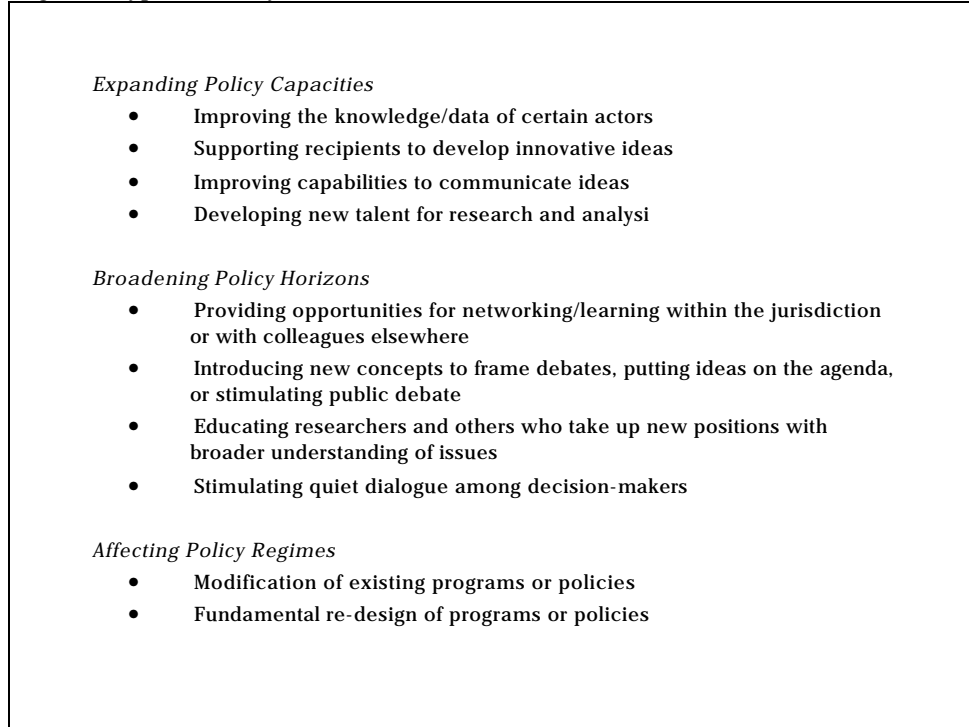
This discussion paper has outlined many perspectives from the literature that are pertinent to developing an evaluation framework for assessing the policy influence of IDRC projects.   It suggests that the framework should be expanded beyond a narrow focus on research, anticipate the complexities and dynamics of policy-making at the national and local levels, and identify the full range of actors involved in policy deliberations.  The framework should inject realism about role and impact of research in particular in policy debates and political processes.  There are many actors, often very well resourced and positioned, seeking to influence policy-makers – and this does not include the advocates of many other worthy issues competing for the attention of governments, citizens, and the media.  Moreover, policy inquiry proceeds in a conflictual, value-laden environment.

Does this mean that sponsoring policy inquiry is ineffective, that it has little or no influence?  Weiss (1977) sees the findings and concepts flowing from research as potentially influencing the lenses through which policy-makers and others discern and evaluate problems, alternatives, and policies.  Sabatier (1988) suggests that researchers may assist advocacy coalitions in maintaining a dynamic equilibrium in their struggle over idea, moderate shrill debate, and foster policy-oriented learning.  However, Lindquist (1992) has conversely argued that experts can exacerbate conflict, particularly if proper fora are not available for the exchange and scrutiny of views and findings. Kingdon (1984) ascribes considerable influence to the conventional wisdom among experts at certain moments in time, which may influence which alternatives are considered and the decisions taken.  He sees important roles for policy entrepreneurs, who may be researchers of one kind or another.  Lindquist (1990) suggests that, one must look beyond specific projects and events, and consider how the experience and knowledge gained by individuals (or organizations) that may be used in other contexts years later, which is clearly a difficult task if one does not have the advantage of hindsight.

This does not mean that particular IDRC projects will not have a clear impact on policy, but even for those projects with this objective, we should have realistic expectations about the potential for influence.  Ultimately, whether in developed or developing countries, supporting policy inquiry is an act of faith: we build policy capacity not because we believe that there will be measurable and unambiguous impacts on government policy, but rather, because we believe that having more rather than less policy inquiry is better for furthering dialogue, debate, and the sharing of ideas from elsewhere.  The majority of the ideas or innovations generated will never become policy or will get "out-competed", for whatever reason, by other ideas or imperatives. Assessing policy influence, then, is typically about carefully discerning *intermediate* influences, such as expanding capacities of chosen actors and broadening horizons of others that comprise a policy network (see Figure 9). As suggested by the work of Pross,

Sabatier, and others, this requires developing a full view of the range of actors involved in a project's "domain", the nature of relationships among those actors, and a very good sense of how that network and policy field has evolved over time.

Figure 9 Types of Policy Influence

*Expanding Policy Capacities*
- **Improving the knowledge/data of certain actors**
- **Supporting recipients to develop innovative ideas**
- **Improving capabilities to communicate ideas**
- **Developing new talent for research and analysi**

*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**

*Affecting Policy Regimes*
- **Modification of existing programs or policies**
- **Fundamental re-design of programs or policies**

This paper has introduced many frameworks and concepts geared towards conveying how the policy process works, the diversity of policy inquiry, and the role it can play in those processes. This multitude of perspectives is bewildering, but necessary, since they reflect the complex environment in which policy inquiry must be supported and understandings conveyed, hopefully to have an influence on public policy, however indirectly. One approach is to integrate these perspectives and develop an overarching framework to guide the strategic evaluation, but such a framework would be very complex, multi-layered, and, in the end, not much different than the series of approaches outlined in the pages above.

Another approach, the one that I rely on here, is simply to distil, for the purposes of the strategic evaluation, the key information that project managers and other respondents should supply to the Evaluation Unit. This should be done in such a way that it does not require respondents to be familiar with all the concepts in the literature, but rather, stimulates them to more systematically and fully reflect on their experience with a project. I have written this discussion paper in such a way as to provide background on the issues, so that designated project managers and respondents can understand the logic behind the questions posed, have a common language for reviewing and sharing their experiences, and explore aspects of their projects they might take for granted or not have thought to included in their assessments. The questions are divided into three clusters

(see Figure 10) which focus respectively on describing (1) the nature and evolution of the implied policy network, (2) the objectives and expectations of the IDRC-sponsored project, and (3) the outputs and outcomes of the project, including unanticipated events.

Figure 10 Framework for Strategic Evaluation
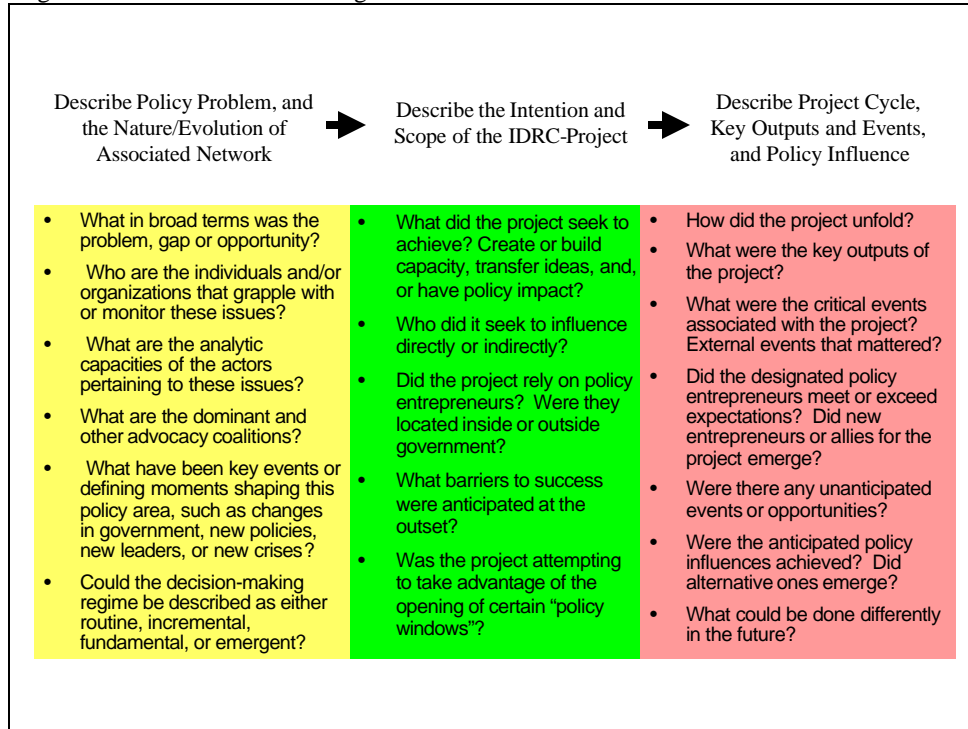


From a methodological standpoint the literature would strongly suggest that the assessments of projects take advantage of "thick" description of the policy networks (local or national) and the design and experience with of those projects. Obtaining coverage of all IDRC projects by means of a survey instrument would not produce such rich information, and would overly burden staff across the organization. The recommended approach is to identify the full range of projects that IDRC has supported over a certain time frame, and then develop a typology of those projects, so that a representative sample by category and by region can be selected. This would allow the Evaluation Unit and colleagues across the organization to focus their efforts and produce higher quality information for evaluative purposes.

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