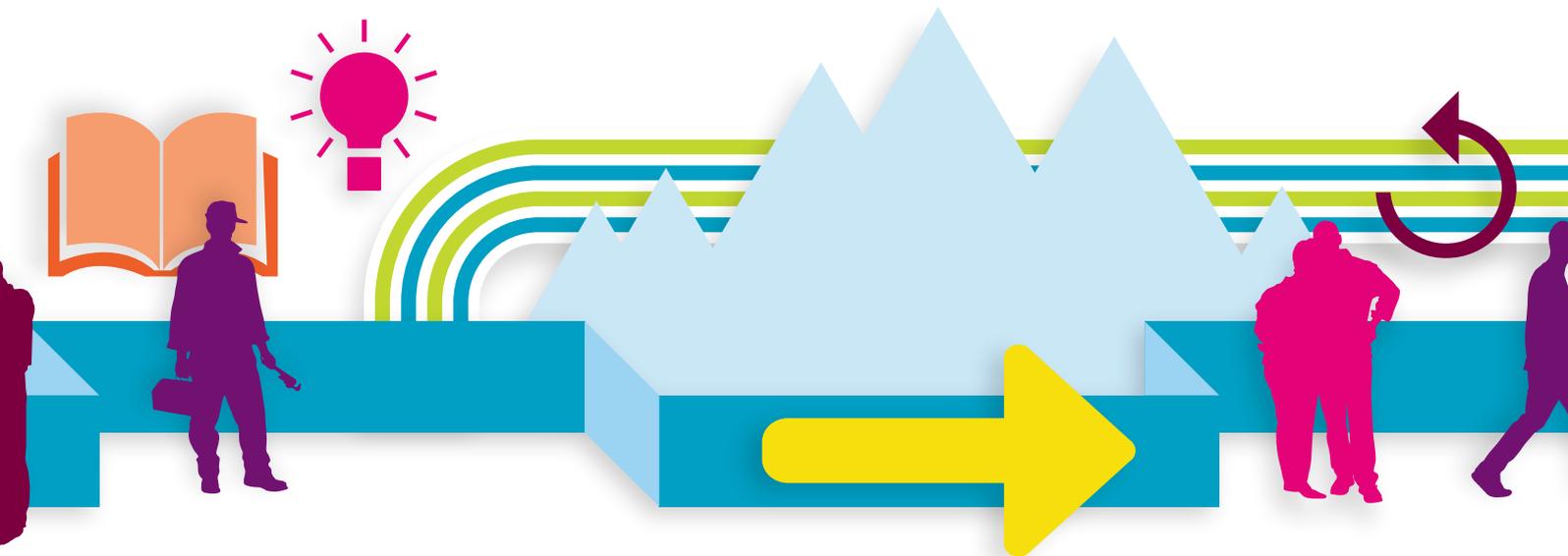


# SUPPORTING PUBLIC POLICY MAKING THROUGH POLICY ANALYSIS AND POLICY LEARNING



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# SUPPORTING PUBLIC POLICY MAKING THROUGH POLICY ANALYSIS AND POLICY LEARNING

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to bring conceptual and methodological clarification to the way the European Training Foundation (ETF) approaches policy analysis and policy making, with a view to supporting the ETF's results-oriented work and its predictability. The paper builds on the ETF Yearbook 2012: evaluation and monitoring of vocational education and training (VET) systems.

Concepts such as policy analysis and policy making are certainly not new. The challenge for us at the ETF is to identify which of the many perspectives and approaches are the most suitable for our mandate, which explicitly states the need to align ourselves with the goals of building and improving institutional capacity in order to embed effective public policies in VET. In other words, our task is to ensure that policy analysis better supports policy making, with the ETF acting as a catalyst and a learning facilitator in the policy dialogue, rather than a reviewer or evaluator through externally run processes.

Based on years of ETF experience, policy learning is considered as part of the solution<sup>1</sup>.

At the ETF, beginning in 2003, Peter Grootings and Søren Nielsen proposed policy learning as a method of work that refers mainly to practice-driven, continuous improvement approach to VET reforms.

*Policy learning emphasises not simply the involvement but, rather, the active engagement of national stakeholders in developing their own policy solutions, and is based on the understanding that there are no universally valid models that can simply be transferred or copied from one context to another. At best, there is a wealth of international, though context-specific, experience in dealing with similar policy issues that can be shared (ETF, 2005).*

Policy learning takes place within a sound policy culture and environment, based on accountability (not externally imposed (Fullan, 2012)) and the ownership of local stakeholders; it is also a reflective policy-making process in which creativity and local capacities are used to their fullest extent, encouraging innovation at all levels of VET system governance, while also valuing international experience.

This paper does not discuss the role of evidence in policy analysis and policy making, although this is critical to the success of these processes, at least in terms of reducing their politicisation or with regard to discretionary decision making.

## 2. WHAT IS POLICY? WHY DO WE WORK ON POLICY?

We define policy as a “purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors” (Anderson, 1975). Policy should be acknowledged as a new perspective with regard to social transformation, and one which entails a shift towards the ownership and responsibility of the actors involved in the reforms and modernisation processes.

This extends beyond documents or legislation and includes activities on the ground. Public policy can be generally defined as a system of laws, regulatory measures, courses of action, and funding priorities concerning a given topic promulgated by a governmental entity or its representatives. Public policies are one of the main means through which order is set in societies and systems are governed.

Public policies also play a key role in introducing changes to societies and in guiding individual and collective behaviour.

Policy is no longer a regulation imposed by an impersonal “state”, but an improvement initiative proposed by multiple actors, through negotiated collective agreements and implemented through collective actions. A policy should integrate, add to or consolidate the micro, meso and macro levels (Parsons, 1996).

Therefore, analysing the process through which public policies are shaped and implemented and detecting its strengths and weaknesses are the first steps in understanding how we may design policies to improve order and governance and bring about effective change.

Analysing policy formulation as an ongoing, dynamic, interdependent and contextual process is essential and a prerequisite to achieving good results.

An initial indication of maturity in the system would be the existence of a policy approach with reference to educational reforms. Subsequent signs are related to the external coherency and internal consistency of this approach, ensuring that the step can be taken from isolated policy initiatives to making the entire policy system functional and efficient – in a position to deal with existing improvement needs and able to plot the path towards future goals.

A culture of quality policy will certainly pave the way towards better results.

### 3. WHAT IS POLICY MAKING?

Policy making is a complex ongoing process that stretches over long periods and involves many interests and participants, and which may vary along the course of time. Policies are influenced by context and are therefore embedded in national, economic, political, cultural, and social structures.

As a result, policies, like soft systems (Checkland, 1981), are highly dependent on and specific to actors, context, sector, site and issue. For these reasons it is important to ensure that policy options are differentiated and adapted to the country’s context-specific needs.

Traditional approaches to policy making have assumed that policy-making processes are, and ought to be, centralised and hierarchical. This

is clearly in tension with a greater demand for participation in the development of policy from an increasingly fragmented and sophisticated polity.

Some interesting alternative approaches to policy making are emerging out of Europe based on creating a role for governments in managing policy networks. But in order to better understand the complex process of policy making, and to improve the process of policy making itself, much effort is dedicated to policy analysis.

### 4. WHAT IS POLICY ANALYSIS?

Policy analysis can be defined, in this specific case, as the systematic investigation of alternative policy options and the process of gathering and integrating the evidence for and against each option. It involves a problem-solving approach, establishing the means of collection and interpretation, and some attempts to predict the consequences of alternative courses of action.

The policy literature suggests a plethora of perspectives and frameworks for policy analysis.

Although various approaches to policy analysis exist, three general approaches (so general that they are also found in Wikipedia), can be distinguished: the analycentric, the policy process, and the meta-policy approaches.

- The “analycentric” approach focuses on individual problems and their solutions; its scope is the micro-scale and its problem interpretation is usually of a technical nature. The primary aim is to identify the most effective and efficient solution in technical and economic terms (e.g. the most efficient allocation of resources).
- The “policy process” approach puts its focal point onto political processes and stakeholders involved; its scope is the meso-scale and its problem interpretation is usually of a political nature. It aims at determining what processes and means are used and tries to explain the role and influence of stakeholders within the policy process. By changing the relative power and influence of certain groups (e.g., enhancing public participation and consultation), solutions to problems may be identified.

- The “meta-policy approach” is a system and context approach; its scope is the macro-scale and its problem interpretation is usually of a structural nature. It aims at explaining the contextual factors of the policy process; i.e., what are the political, economic and socio-cultural factors influencing it. As problems may result from structural factors (e.g. a certain economic system or political institution), solutions may entail changing the structure itself ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Policy\\_analysis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Policy_analysis)).

We are essentially questioning how separate these approaches need to be and suggest considering the borders between them as indistinct. Consequently, we propose, for the benefit of the policy analysis itself, using elements of the last two approaches in setting the policy priorities, and adding the first approach when formulating the policy option.

From the angle of other criteria, we can also refer to policy analysis as public policy creation and implementation. But, as mentioned earlier, at the ETF policy implementation is part of the policy-making process rather than policy analysis. The policy cycle framework and the policy networks perspective are examined below in relation to the above three models.

## 5. THE POLICY CYCLE FRAMEWORK

Based on the “policy process” model, mentioned above, the policy cycle framework aims to disaggregate the complex phenomenon of policy formation into manageable steps (Bridgman and Davis, 2003). It suggests breaking down the process into its sequential stages and examining what happens in each stage separately, while at the same time assuming that each stage influences the following (Howlett and Ramesh, 1995).

A critique of the policy cycle as a framework for policy understanding highlights three main issues.

1. It lacks the theoretical ability to predict policy outcomes (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1993),
2. It holds that public policies are dominated and led by administrators rather than by other actors (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier,

1993; Colebatch, 2005). This defines the limits of the institutional policy model that is determined by political institutions, which give policy legitimacy. The political institutions are the executive, the legislature and the judiciary.

3. Its focus is on the bureaucratic process while disregarding aspects related to content and context (Everett, 2003) and intergovernmental relations (Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1993).

As a model for policy analysis, the policy cycle also adheres too much to normative processes and imposes schematic stages on what actually happens (Hill, 2005).

Despite criticism, we consider that this concept is still useful for disaggregating the web of policy transactions and for examining the process through which policies are made (DeLeon, 1999; Pielke Jr, 2004).

## 6. THE POLICY NETWORKS PERSPECTIVE

This perspective offers a different way to tackle some of the complexities involved in policy-making processes. It considers the above three models with their cross-border interdependencies.

Policy networks are often used as a metaphor (Dowding, 1995) to describe new forms of governance beyond state control, involving both public and private actors. The policy networks perspective concentrates on the cluster of interests in the (meta-)policy process, as well as on the relations between the actors who participate in the (meta-)policy process – the network – and seeks to explain policy outcomes in relation to these characteristics (Marsh and Rhodes, 1992).

The literature on policy networks gives several theoretical reasons and empirical determinants of how policy networks are formed and defines characteristics of certain types of networks (Adam and Kriesi, 2007; Bogason and Toonen, 1998; Borell and Johansson, 1996; Börzel, 1998; Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, 1997; Marin and Mayntz, 1991).

Mitigating the limits of the above mentioned institutional model, the policy network is also part of the solution in the case of organisational mismatch between contemporary problems to be solved and the organisational structures assigned to solve these problems. For instance, while the borders between different levels of governmental units as well as different policy sectors are administratively defined, societal problems are characterised by their interdependent and cross-scale nature (Berkes, 2002; Hanf and Scharpf, 1978; Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004; Scharpf, 1991).

Each stage of any policy process is governed by a specific network. This network structure and characteristics are shaped by the institutions/ organisations and the procedures that govern each stage, and by the interactions between actors who have an interest in the specific stage and access to the relevant decision-making forums. Furthermore, each stage network operates in the context of, and in relation to, other stages' networks.

The outcomes of each policy stage can be explained by its network characteristics and by the opportunities and constraints imposed by other stages' networks.

It is very important that the performance of the policy network be managed and measured by considering variables such as legitimacy, representation and internal and external effectiveness. Cooperation, patterns of information flow, joined strategies, as well as other characteristics of the actors' inter-relations in the network are the principal means by which policy outcomes can be explained.

For these reasons, during capacity building it is essential to observe the success factors for performance improvement and to act accordingly.

The ETF already has relevant experience in this area and can call on several practices created through its support to the partner countries to explore whether different types of policy networks can explain differences in problem-solving capacities. We note here only two examples: national observatories (ETF, 2009), and local development partnerships.

In the article "Treating Networks Seriously," O'Toole (1997) emphasized the importance of an empirical research agenda for a network approach when studying inter-organizational policy-making processes within complex policy areas. The ETF re-launched its action research in 2011

and has become intensively engaged in capacity building and policy advice since 2013.

The ETF is proposing to combine the policy cycle with the policy networks, the latter being approached as a model of collective decision making, an exchange process between actors in a market for control and influence over resources.

However, the above perspectives ignore some important aspects of policy making and are limited in their ability to explain and predict policy outcomes. How should we work with this limitation? What must be done to mitigate risks?

## 7. THE ETF APPROACH

The multi-faceted nature of policy analysis makes it clear that there is no single, let alone 'one best', way of conducting policy analyses.

Through the policy analysis, our role is to assist policymakers (governments and relevant but multiple key stakeholders, at all decision-making levels) in choosing a course of action from among complex alternatives under uncertain conditions.

## 8. HOW DOES THE ETF ASSIST PARTNER COUNTRIES?

Our assumption is that policy analysis cannot replace the judgement of the policymaker (any more than a blood test is intended as a substitute for a doctor's diagnosis). At the ETF, we propose that countries identify and define the policy problem, decide on priorities and look for policy alternatives as a potential response, comparing their results in order to formulate the best policy option ('formulating the problem'). In this way policy outcomes can be formulated, compared and subsequently predicted.

Through other actions, the achievement of predicted outcomes should be monitored during the implementation process through various actions, with a view to taking any required corrective action. In the policy cycle these stages can be also called "solving the problem".

Russell Ackoff once said: "We fail more often because we solve the wrong problem than

because we get the wrong solution to the right problem”.

And Einstein himself stated: “If I had only one hour to save the world, I would spend fifty-five minutes defining the problem, and only five minutes finding the solution.”

This means that a great deal of effort should go into the formulation of the policy problem. The definition of problems and the identification of policy solutions are not easily separable in the light of countries’ dependence on governance structures to tackle such problems (Jann and Wegrich, 2007).

This is why the ETF focuses biennially in the Torino Process on the policy-cycle stage described as “formulating the problem”. Together with the policy evaluation which is carried out for progress-tracking purposes as a first step in the Torino Process, all the stages in “formulating the problem” are associated with “policy analysis”.

The ETF annual interventions in its partner countries are part of the process of “solving the problem”, and are part of the policy-making process, as defined in the context of the ETF’s work.

Policy analysis deals with those priorities agreed on during the problem identification process. All problems and priorities should be ranked according to their urgency and importance. Further, in the course of the analysis of the policy alternatives, and based on ex-ante impact assessment, the policy choice(s) should be formulated in relation to particular thematic areas, as categorised by the ETF.

The ETF will analyse the policy choice to ascertain the correct level of implementation before this work begins, and this will be accompanied by the necessary methodological work or a proposal for such work to the European Commission’s programming services. As mentioned, ETF interventions in partner countries are ongoing, except in cases where the country’s cooperation with the European Union has been suspended.

In the ETF logic of action, the primary job is to solve a problem rather than merely creating methodologies and models, and therefore empowering people and organisations is key to this goal. The ETF capacity-building function is conceptualised and operationalised to serve this purpose.

Why are we using the word “complex”?

Examination of a policy and designing a policy change are carried out in complex environments. The diverse stakeholders and their growing expectations of the VET system, the multiple inter-dependencies of the VET sector and the quest for holistic approaches are only a few elements to be considered. However, it must be noted that the degree and nature of complexity varies greatly across countries and over time within the same country. In response to this the ETF has adopted the so-called “differentiated approach” in all its undertakings in an effort to capture the specificity of both (i) country environments – economic, social and cultural models and public administration and management practices, and (ii) the country’s stage of implementation of its public policies, by considering the pace of development as defined by the absorption capacity of social systems.

“Uncertain” are not the policy changes, but their effects. Thus in the potential effects analysis the focus should be on what can happen instead of what will happen, or, in other words, on “what if”, including factors that might strongly affect the policy outcomes.

Public policies have become more uncertain and indeterminate in many respects, and the difficulty of effectively steering and governing education and training and employment systems has grown, in particular in the absence of clear economic growth strategies.

Under these circumstances, there is an increasing need to professionalise the policy analysis and policy making and to ensure effective governance of these processes marked by the capacity to anticipate problems. Enhanced knowledge, understanding and effective learning are facilitated by the ETF through capacity-building actions, policy learning and policy networks empowerment (Torinets) in particular. Leadership is essential and the ETF contributes to developing leaders who will nurture other leaders, believing that only through widespread leaderships is it possible to carry out a set agenda and create greater sustainability.

Having said that, we strongly advocate the participation of a diverse range of stakeholders (governments, the private sector, civil society organisations, employers and trade unions in particular) as members of policy networks created at all policy-cycle stages within a multi-level governance perspective. With their capacity

to foster interactive contributions from a broad-based membership, as well as their informal patterns of communication, networks can present a valuable method for multi-actor collaboration across all stages of the policy process (Sutton, 1999). According to some scholars, networks are presented as a vehicle to address “governance gaps” identified as “operational gaps” (an inability to deal with complexity) and “participatory gaps” (a large-scale democratic deficit)<sup>2</sup>.

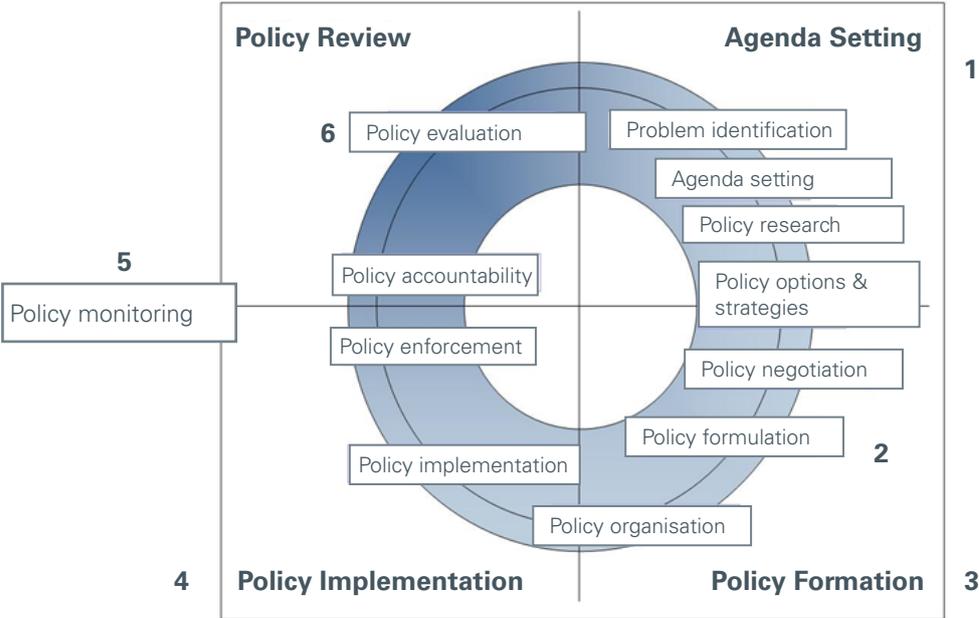
Although in real life it does not progress logically through these stages, the most inspirational and influential approaches of the policy cycle for the ETF’s work are those presented graphically in Figure 1 below.

However, Fullan (2012) delivers a word of caution referring to policy dilemmas. He talks of the policy-overload dilemma, which can be summarized as follows:

- Policy overload happens when governments fall into the trap of developing plans that are too complex, too vague and contain too many priorities.
- Policy overload results in (i) lack of focus, (ii) fragmented priorities, and (iii) a sense of an endless stream of ad hoc initiatives.

Fullan suggests that the overall policy plan to be actionable, reasonably clear and lead to widespread ownership.

**FIGURE 1. POLICY CYCLE**



Graphical presentation based on the Policy Cycle proposed by Eco Informatics International Inc ([www.geostrategis.com/images/policycycle.jpg](http://www.geostrategis.com/images/policycycle.jpg))

ETF definition:

- actions 6 + 1 + 2** = policy analysis through the biennial Torino Process;
- actions 3 + 4 + 5** = policy making through interventions in the annual Work Programme defined based on the Torino Process.

The individual steps in the policy cycle process are described in detail by Findeisen and Quade (1985) and by Quade (1989, Chapter 4 – cited in Walker, 2000). Other authors are proposing to name the first two stages policy formulation and to make a distinction from the adoption stage since other stakeholders, for example legislative bodies such as parliaments, are involved. Their option is presented here in Figure 2.

**FIGURE 2. PUBLIC POLICY PROCESS**



The steps proposed by the ETF in the case of policy formulation, as a stage of the public policy process (see Figure 2 above), are presented in Figure 3 below.

**FIGURE 3. POLICY FORMULATION STEPS**



## 9. A FINAL WORD OF CAUTION

Distinguished scholars and administrators worldwide identify the economic challenges and pressures facing education and training, compare policy developments in numerous jurisdictions, and demonstrate the ways in which networks achieve results. However, as Pal (2010) suggests:

*In reflecting on the nature of public policy, we also have to realize what it is not. It is not the implemented program, the behaviours of public servants who put it into effect, or indeed the reactions of citizens affected by it. If we take the definition, we are forced to realize that public policy – as a course of action – is not the action itself, in the same way that a map is different from travelling. Policies are mental constructs, strings of phrases, and ideas. The text of a policy statement and the programs and actions that follow it are simply evidence for the mental construct. Analysing policy is akin to trying to figure out which maps people used by studying the paths they took on their journey. The fact that there was a journey and a destination is not*

*proof that maps were in fact used, as anyone who's taken a pleasant ramble in the woods can attest. But we presume that our governments are doing more than rambling, that they have a plan, that their journeys and their destinations are guided by policy. This presumption will often be proven wrong – government actions may be the result of accident, instinct or habit, rather than of policy. Once we understand this, we understand the challenge of doing policy analysis – it is an attempt to grasp an underlining structure of ideas that supposedly guides action.*

Policy analysis can pose core questions: What is the nature of the problem? What are we trying to achieve? How shall we go about in addressing it? How do we know if we have been successful or not?

The conditions or factors of success for both the policy analysis and the policy making are also relevant considering that this work is not that of experts but that it is carried out by stakeholders as members of policy networks.

However, institutionalisation of public policy analysis and policy making can contribute to efficiency gains and improvements in results.

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## NOTES

1. There are large numbers of policy learning models: rational learning (Weyland, 2002; 2006); social learning (Hall, 1993); political learning (Hecló, 1974); instrumental learning (Boswell, 2008); collaborative learning (Raffe and Spours, 2007); lesson drawing (Rose, 1991; 1993; 2005); government learning (Etheredge, 1981; Etheredge and Short, 1983); and systematically pinching ideas (Schneider and Ingram, 1988). Attempts to unite some of these models have mainly failed in generating long-lasting consensus even on basic issues (e.g. Bennett and Howlett, 1992). In the field of education policy research, three models of policy learning have been outlined by Raffe and Spours (2007), which can be applied to a range of education policies: (i) rationalist, (ii) collaborative, and (iii) politicised.
2. See works by Keane (2003), Florini (2000), and Sandström, 2008.
3. Fullan, 2012.





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