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Drafting a Policy Analysis: How to raise it to the optimal level?

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1 Context

Knowledge and ideas have potency in politics and are part of the character of power. Expertise and knowhow are precious public goods in any society, but even more so in a globalized world characterized by increasing complexity, growing interdependence and technological advancement. However, despite an increase in the demand for expertise, many democratic governments have avoided engaging with external support. This is even more surprising as governments and state institutions have often struggled with limited human and financial resources, bureaucratization, and a lack in specialization. Budgetary constraints, cuts in human resources, growing work load and time pressure have often led to reactive policymaking and prevented innovative policy approaches.

Decision-makers have come under pressure to make speedy decisions. This in turn has come at the cost of democratic processes and what Huysmans (2004, 332) calls the democratically guaranteed notion of 'equal fallibility of truths'. Divergent or contradictory views and approaches are hardly included in decision-making processes. Shortcomings are often the result of unidimensional processes, inadequate analysis and ill-informed forecasting (Mintrom 2010: 38). Quite often, scientific knowledge and expert advice are used to legitimize political decisions ex post (Kluger Dionigi 2017).

At the same time, researchers and experts in university centers, research institutes and think tanks[1] have increasingly sought to influence democratic policy and strategy making.

Situated at the so-called "centre of the power-knowledge nexus",[2] these institutions are positioned at the crossroads of different fields— academia, politics, business, and media. Their role is to objectively analyze, national, regional and international situations; create ways to address issues and peacefully resolve conflicts (what is called "track 2 diplomacy"); and engage in research brokerage by organizing debates on a variety of issues, involving actors, analysts and observers. In short, they try to interpret the world. Experts, academics and research institutions of various kinds can act as "decision enablers" and help public and private actors to better understand and assess developments, issues or risks, and to develop strategies, solutions and measures. Besides recommendations for decision-makers, these institutions also facilitate and contribute to public debates and education. While in some countries policy research has been funded by governments, public funds or institutions such

[1] Think tanks can be regarded as "organisations which claim autonomy and attempt to influence public policy by mobilising research" (Kelstrup, 2016, 10). Built around a permanent cadre of researchers and experts, their mission is to contribute to policy-making or the formulation of strategies. They "subscribe to a perspective of public interest" (T. de Montbrial and T. Gomart, "What is a Think-Tank?", Etudes de l'IFRI, Nov. 2019, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/demontbrial_gomart_what_is_a_think_tank_2019.pdf).

[2] J. Veselinovic, "European Foreign Policy Think Tanks and 'Strategic Autonomy': Making Sense of the EU's Role in the World of Geoeconomics", chap. 4 *in* M. Babić, et al., "The Political Economy of Geoeconomics: Europe in a Changing World", Springer International Publishing AG, 2023, p. 90.

as parliament, in other countries policy research has traditionally sought to be financially independent from state and government. In a large number of cases, policy research has been backed by private foundations and in some cases by political parties. In the latter case, policy research and recommendations are embedded in the ideological worldview of the respective political movement and target policymakers from this movement.

A diverse setting of political research has typically guaranteed a vivid and diverse debate, a more attentive and sensitive public audience and larger variety of policy options. Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries which fall under the model of associative democracy – where power is highly decentralized and the state's responsibility for civic well-being is shared with like-minded civic associations (Jones and Marsden 2010) – have a long tradition of engaging with external policy expertise.

Although policy research has played a central role in the history of European integration, there has been less enthusiasm for this approach in continental Europe (except for Germany). Instead, there is a trend towards the ad hoc commissioning of experts and the instrumentalization of such experts for the legitimation of a certain policy agenda.

The lack of interest in sustainable engagement with policy research institutions has often been explained with limited financial resources. Insufficient visibility and a lack of appreciation for their added value have been other factors which have supported low engagement with policy research institutions. In countries characterized by a state-centric political culture, the perception that state institutions already have enough expertise has prevented open engagement with external expertise. In such cases, there has hardly been any circulation of personnel between academia, administration, and policy research.

Compared with the United States, the European policy research community still lacks true impact on policymaking and public opinion. Euro-think tanks, although welcomed by policymakers and observers of the sector, still have to find their place in the European policymaking system.

This paper aims to explain policy research, its challenges and how it can be distinguished from academic or commissioned research. It also elaborates on the criteria, conditions, limitations, and challenges of policy research, analysis and recommendations.

Written by researchers of the Austrian Institute for international Affairs (oiip) in collaboration with the University for Continuing Education Krems, it reflects an Austrian and Central European continental perspective on policy research and advice.

2 Between science and politics: the working spectrum of a policy analysis (PA)

Policy analysis can be defined as the activity of producing scientific and objective knowledge to orient political action and give rise to evidence-based policymaking (Weimer and Vining 2010: 23f.). The content, style, and objective of Policy Analysis changes with the addressee. Policy Analysis addressing the broader public usually aims at pointing out a certain issue, highlights its relevance and develops some general ideas about how to understand and resolve the issue on a societal level.

On the other hand, Policy Analysis (PA) targeting decision makers needs to be to the point. Good PA should be aware of the competences and capacities of the addressed institution or body and examine public policies and programs (Nagel 1984). In an ideal case, both epistemic communities and scientific knowledge guide the policy process: when 'in-house' expertise is lacking, one can resort to expert advice from 'outside' the institutional apparatus.

In this regard, it is worth introducing the politics of expertise (PoE) and why it is a fundamental phenomenon in the 21st century political reality (Turner 2013: 14).The globalization process has led policymakers to deal with increasingly complex issues, often rather technical, for which it has been necessary to rely on expert knowledge providing inputs to institutions and bureaucrats. In fact, recent years saw the development of a new relationship between science and democracy, which interact and complement one another, as the former informs policy and the latter guarantees its popular mandate.
However, care should be taken not to escalate into forms of technocracy, where the dominion of experts would tend to excessively depoliticize issues. In other words, the politics of expertise (PoE) should result in a well-structured web of actors, both institutional and non-institutional ones, which interact in order to both intervene through policy outputs and achieve the desired outcomes.

Thus, experts and epistemic communities provide analyses and advocacy to policy-makers, influencing or informing the policy process. They normally distinguish themselves from interest groups for the interests they represent. While lobbyists tend to reflect private concerns, often linked to business activities, think tanks, research institutes and epistemic communities have as a primary mission which is the public interest.

Indeed, a Policy Analysis offers **influential ideas**, **policy options** and **strategies** on how to **confront common challenges and threats perceived by the general population**, **respond to the uncertain future**, and help policymakers **address policy issues.** It informs long-term decision-making with calm, authoritative and actionable insights and provides an

independent (but not necessarily neutral) and **in-depth assessment of the complex issues** that policymakers and other stakeholders are confronted with on the basis of solid scientific evidence and clear interpretive argumentation.

In short-lived times, with a constant sense of crisis and uncertainty and amidst the "new structural change of the public" (Habermas) incl. post-truth tendencies and social media dynamics, a PA needs to be both precise, **founded on solid research** as well as **adjusted to the needs of decision makers**. Solid research entails that the methods applied meet academic ethics standards – respecting data protection and the protection of sensitive sources – and satisfy quality criteria such as correct citations. Adjusting to the needs of decision makers in turn means that recommendations and options highlighted should be realistic and feasible. Essentially, they must consider the capacities and capabilities of the decision-makers and be specific with their recommendations.

PA differs fundamentally from academic publications. Different from PA, academic publications usually speak to a disciplinary debate. They include the review and discussion of the relevant literature and highlight the contribution of the publication to a specific discussion. Academic publications focus on constructing and testing theories for the purpose of understanding society. In contrast, PA is usually designed to bear directly on **present public policy problems**, for instance: was the so-called "Arab Spring" predictable? Is there a reasonable chance for a regime change in Russia? What could be the future (post-Ukraine) security architecture in Europe?
Thus, rather than further assessing a problem, PA should be **solution focused**. A PA aims at understanding a specific issue which is of political interest and develops recommendations for decision-makers or the broader public to raise awareness and ideally solve the issue through **empirically informed, practical and feasible analysis.**

PA also differs from policy research, which aims to generalize about behavior and activities, while PA attempts to make its application **more specific**. Contrary to policy research's focus on identifying a variety of potential policy options, PA aims at highlighting the most effective, efficient, and feasible one (Weimer and Vining 2010: 719).

3 How the knowledge transfer takes place: main objectives of a PA

There are different ways in which expert knowledge can be mobilized. In general, it might be argued that think tanks, research institutes and epistemic communities may inform and guide public institutions at different stages of the policy cycle.

On the one hand, Policy Analysis may **push some issues of common concern on top of governmental or global agendas**, providing in-depth risk assessments and requiring political action on the subject. An example of this way to provide knowledge may be the expert advice at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. In that case public health experts and virologists issued recommendations which then shaped policies and measures of national and international institutions. This kind of knowledge transfer is **expert-driven** and may help bureaucrats in both **agenda-setting and policy formulation** phases.

On the other hand, PA is also crucial in providing data to elaborate policies on the basis of scientific evidence. On the theme of Covid-19 pandemic, during the **formulation** of ad-hoc policies, decision-makers needed records concerning the disease. In this case, bureaucrats asked experts specific questions in order to legitimize political action in the health domain. For this reason, it might be argued that the knowledge transfer was **policy-driven** in nature.

Lastly, PA can assist and accompany policy processes. In such cases, governments and institutions integrate external experts in the formulation and implementation of already defined policy strategy processes and measures. An example of this may be the expertise needed to **implement** policies during the Covid-19 pandemic, when institutions were beginning to take measures against the spread of the virus. In the present case, the production of expert knowledge may be seen as an **iterative process**, which consists in the peer interaction between policymakers and scientists (Littoz-Monnet 2017).

PA may also provide the assessment of policy and programs; this kind of evaluation differs in its purpose depending on whether it is done before (ex-ante) or after (ex-post) the implementation of measures. **Ex-ante PA** is normally conducted when policymakers need expert advice to properly tackle specific and highly complex phenomena on the political agenda.

On the contrary, **ex-post program evaluation** is carried out after the policy or program has been implemented (Weimer and Vining 2010: 354). In fact, during the evaluation phase of the policy process, experts and bureaucrats can assess the effectiveness of the action taken. Thus, ex-post Policy Analysis assess whether the measure adopted has solved the policy problem, or whether issues persist, and a re-evaluation of policy tools could be necessary. If this is the

case, the political analyst should assist the decision-maker in the re-assessment of the formulation and implementation policy phases (Mergaert R. Minto 2015).
In addition, sound Policy Analysis should include a solution analysis that generates a set of mutually exclusive policy alternatives and predicts their respective impacts in terms of achieving the client's intended goal (Weimer and Vining 2010: 359).

As just demonstrated, experts may inform policymaking in almost all stages of the policy process – apart from the policy adoption phase which is just reserved to policy-makers – helping bureaucrats to deal with policy problems and to correctly elaborate, implement and evaluate specific measures and programs. However, it is worth remembering that PA **should not dictate** the political agenda, **it should rather inform** policymakers about priorities, options, and technical issues. Hence, it is important to acknowledge the difference between the roles of experts, policymakers, and bureaucrats.

As already expressed, the first reason why sometimes policy-makers resort to experts is to **inform and guide policy.** As the political scientist Ernst Haas (1992) rightly pointed out, epistemic communities have a greater entrepreneurial role in policy when highly complex issues are on the agenda.
Another motive for appealing to expert advice is to **depoliticize institutional actions.** An objective expertise may ensure the development of both neutral and apolitical policy programs that are sometimes needed by some international organizations (normally less politically sided than national bodies). Other times instead, policy-makers need expert consulting to substantiate their political positions, resulting in a phenomenon called the **"politicization of expertise".**
Moreover, epistemic communities, think tanks and research institutes may also help **minimize the institutional insecurity** of national and international bureaucracies. Providing policy-makers with expertise on specific issues might help them take decisive specific actions and even expand their action to other policy domains.

The last reason why sometimes it is necessary to resort to experts seems to be the further **legitimation of institutional actions** when democratic support is lacking. This is particularly true for the international bureaucracies which, often due to their executive and technocratic governance, find themselves having to rely on external (output) legitimation.

To better understand **why Policy Analysis can be useful to policymaking**, it is necessary to discuss how experts and epistemic communities transfer knowledge to institutions and decision-makers.

There is a difference between external expertise and recommendations offered to national governments and state institutions or the European Union. Knowledge transfer in regard to the EU can occur at any institutional level – municipal, national or international. In the case of the EU, however, it is important to remember that the subsidiarity principle needs to be followed.

Taking the example of the European Union and its democratic deficit, public policies need an on-going legitimacy to shape the decision-making process. Interest groups and epistemic communities are the actors which can influence EU policy making and provide a certain legitimacy.

However, it is not easy to advantage the EU decision-making process. Firstly, private interest groups are usually more powerful in terms of economic resources to succeed in intervening in political decision. Secondly, when dealing with issues in which the EU Council has a quasi-exclusive right of initiative – e.g., the External Action – it is necessary to be considered as 'qualified interlocutors'[3] (Wallace *et al.* 2020: 391) to succeed in informing policymaking. Though, it is still not clear which criteria the EU Council typically uses to define qualified interlocutors, making it that much more difficult for experts to determine how to orient EU actions.

While the specific objectives of a Policy Analysis might differ according to the political context, the policy field and the addressee, there are some general guidelines regarding what a PA should be able to achieve. Primarily, clarity is a major objective, as a PA should clearly assess the issue at stake by painting a picture of the elements of the issue as well as of the relevant factors and trends implied (M. Michael, 2010, 38f). Moreover, critical engagement with the topic is a determining factor of the PA's quality, as PA should identify errors made in the past and solutions to those as well as alternative visions, ideally based on concrete examples (best-practice models) and their functionality and impact, while also critically assessing the limits and consequences of those approaches (Bardach et al. 2019, 133f.) In order to fully inform the client, a good Policy Analysis should highlight all the ambiguities of a given topic, rather than suppressing them. The analysist bears an essential responsibility to keep the client from being blindsided because of their advice (see Weimer and Vining 2010:.342). A PA also needs to assess different policy alternatives. The criteria applied for such an assessment vary from case to case; however, the most used criteria are efficiency and equity. In addition, practical criteria such as legality, political feasibility and robustness can also be used to identify a recommendable policy alternative (see Bardach & Patashnik 2019: p. 31-49).

[3] Qualified interlocutors' are the actors who are considered by the EU Council as experts qualified to provide expertise. The EU Council is the most difficult institutional body to reach by think tanks since it normally already holds 'in-house' expertise. For this reason, when it is necessary to resort to external knowledge, the EU Council makes sure that the expert advise originates from highly qualified subjects.

Through a PA, engagement in national and/or international conversations should be supported, and the recipient of the analysis should be able to use its contents in order to strengthen their position. To this end, it is necessary to apply lessons learned from other examples to future challenges to outline the scope of the issue. In this sense, a good PA should aim to build experience, knowledge and capacity for the next crisis or any other political and social developments that requires quick and sound political action. A high-quality PA can also extend its scope, for example by forming the basis of a series of high-level workshops or follow-up events as a forum for exchange between policy analysts and policy makers.

4 The choice of the topic (unless the PA is requested on a specific issue, which is often the case)

The choice of topics and approaches is crucial for PA. So-called "**current momentum" topics** or **"contagious topics"** are considered to be the best choices. Both are topics with a high degree of public interest. Preferably authors should be experts in the field (e.g. crucial elections in a region of expertise or an expert of health security in case of a pandemic) and entail the emergence of unforeseen external factors and their consequences (e.g. big protest movements, natural disasters, crisis etc.). By doing so, the PA also serves the communication of the recipient. Furthermore, PA can address **"hidden" issues,** meaning ongoing developments underneath the surface (e.g. EU policymaking) or emerging crises that have received little attention (e.g. the effects of climate change in the Global South). Those topics can also entail so-called **"black swans"** that describe an unpredictable or unforeseen event, typically one with extreme consequences.

The crucial aspect of selecting a topic is being proactive. That means seizing windows of opportunity when the research topic gains public interest and capitalizing on momentum through public support or press coverage of the issue. This allows for shaping debates from the beginning and establishing oneself as an expert. It also enables policy analysts to set the agenda. This is particularly the case with hidden issues that might emerge at a later stage, in an area the author has established expertise.

In other words, a good PA needs to assess the deficits of expertise and legitimacy and advise recipients to reconsider the content of programs and policies (which they might be aware of themselves, otherwise there would be no request for a PA). Therefore, a PA should start with a clear statement and framing of the problem or issue in focus, by outlining its importance ("*why you should care*"), its scope and stakeholders (people affected; international/national/regional/local level). In this context a brief overview over the history and the root-causes is useful to show where the analysis starts from. The analysis should then

include current policy implications ("*why changes are necessary*") and how these are beneficial (incl. political/electoral) and hold opportunities for the recipient. At the same time, there needs to be a debate on obstacles, challenges, and restraints (reasons why affected groups may resist/reject the proposals) as well as competing policy narratives and alternative proposals. Moreover, issues topicality, relevance, and sense of urgency ("*why now?*") should serve as a red thread through the analysis and should be emphasized throughout the analysis.

5 The audience/recipient

The audience of a PA can be decision-makers at different levels such as policy-makers (government; MP/lawmakers; international organization; media; industry; finance; health; NGO; university), as well as bureaucrats, but also the general public. In many cases it is both, as the public influences policy-makers opinions and *vice versa*. Knowing and defining the audience / recipient / addressee is crucial for the formulation of a PA – analyzing an issue for the broad public entails different challenges than providing analysis for practitioners in a policy field.

Drafting a PA needs to identify a number of central elements beforehand. First, it is crucial to understand the recipient's level of influence, political inclinations, interests at stake and past actions in similar cases. In this context, there is a need to examine possible geographical / regional / local constraints, such as political and administrative aspects (dynamics in a policy field and capabilities) but also wider contextual elements, such as where the recipients are situated (e.g. the Central European dimension for Austria). Furthermore, if possible, it is dvantageous to assess the level of knowledge of the issue; however, here it is helpful to assume little to no prior detail knowledge. With the aspect of knowledge, the question of the expectations and the mindset of the recipient arises, particularly in terms of their receptivity to change or their openness to recommendations.

It constitutes an important moral imperative for analysts not to abuse the knowledge gap between them and the recipient to further their own private interests (Dror 1971: 119f.).
However, at the same time a good PA needs to **balance the interests of recipients and the independence/integrity of the expert(s)** that provide(s) expertise. The author should not merely legitimize pre-existing standpoints of the recipients (D. Weimer and A. Vining, 2010: 40f). Their findings are also meant to **challenge the recipient** as long as they are empirically grounded. Through attempting to combine meeting the interests and challenging the standpoints, a PA can achieve **transformative effects**.

6 The methodology

A PA does not exist in a *vacuum.* It must be **backed up with research** that builds the scientific and political case for decisive action. It could also emerge out of an ongoing research project that involves relevant issues for a broader public and draws interest from policymakers. The foremost element is that the analysis is data-driven – qualitative or quantitative – and that this data is analyzed in a way that foregrounds the usability of these findings among the audience.

Political analysts may choose between five approaches to PA. The first method consists of the **formal cost-benefit analysis** and it is used when greater efficiency with a minor cost constitutes the primary goal of the desired policy. A similar approach is the **qualitative cost-benefit analysis** which aims to achieve efficiency, but also to assign values to qualitative determinants as political acceptability and ethics. In contrast, the **modified cost-benefit analysis** aims at evaluating efficiency and qualitative factors in a separate manner. Given the fact that policies rarely achieve efficiency as the exclusive objective, other goals should be taken into account alongside the efficiency factor. Further, **cost effectiveness analysis** constitutes another way to pursue a PA and consists in quantifying both monetary efficiency and another policy goal that may not be monetized. The procedure here is quantitative.

The last and most commonly used method to elaborate a PA is the **multi-goal policy analysis** method which entails the examination of various possible policy goals, among which there might be non-quantifiable objectives (Weimer and Vining 2010: 354-359). The method applied depends on the approach used.

PA should highlight the methodology applied and data used. In this context, the findings of Interpretive Policy Analysis are useful (for example by Hendrik Wagenaar, Dvora Yanow or Peregrine Schwartz-Shea), which do not reduce PA to an analysis of the contents of policies, but include the significance of policies to affected actors, such as practitioners in the field. A good PA therefore attempts to understand how policies are received and thus analyses data in a way that it is useful to the recipients.

Furthermore, the PA may follow inductive or deductive paths. The former relies on empirical observation which subsequently led to the formulation of a theory, while the latter starts from the conceptualization of theory that has then to be verified through empirical data.

A sound methodology reinforces the PA's legitimacy and impact of its recommendations. A PA should also **stimulate the interest of the common audience for the research/analysis procedures** necessary to produce it.

7 The policy recommendations

As previously highlighted, **there is no good PA without recommendations**. Recommendations should follow a few guidelines to render them actionable and credible. Most importantly, they should provide concrete actions in terms of what is specifically feasible. Recommendations should, if possible, start with a consideration of amending existing policies before suggesting comprehensive measures that install new forms of governance and new structures. One possibility for this matter is the illustration of policy options with possible deadlines or practical steps that need to be implemented. In this context, it is helpful to provide a timeline and an itinerary or course of action, where it should be stated what should happen in short-, medium- and long-term.

Recommendations are **not a policymaker's to-do list**; instead, they **articulate the vision** the PA is trying to convey. They should **follow one line and not be eclectic or contradictory**. Recommendations derive out of a **combination of worksteps**: assessing the current situation, articulating the visions and then evaluating the instruments needed to close the gap between the current state and the desired state.

8 The communication/outreach

A PA should also focus on the way to **'sell' the policy to its public** (other members of the organizations, voters, other parties, etc.) and to **build support/consensus** to implement the recommended policy. A **clear strategy for public outreach** needs to be done in advance, including social media strategies, contacting news outlets regarding an opinion editorial that summarizes the analysis' main points and tailor-made public events, amplifies the messages of the PA and creates a broader public for the issues raised.

If perceived to be important, a PA might be circulated. This **"snowballing effect"**, where a PA travels to an expanding circle of recipients, is only made possible because the research findings are in an accessible and transferable format.

At the purely "scientific" level, the research process may **contribute to strengthen data science capacities in-house to further develop data and statistical analysis, as well as future investigation.**

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