



What uses of evaluation along the policy cycle?*

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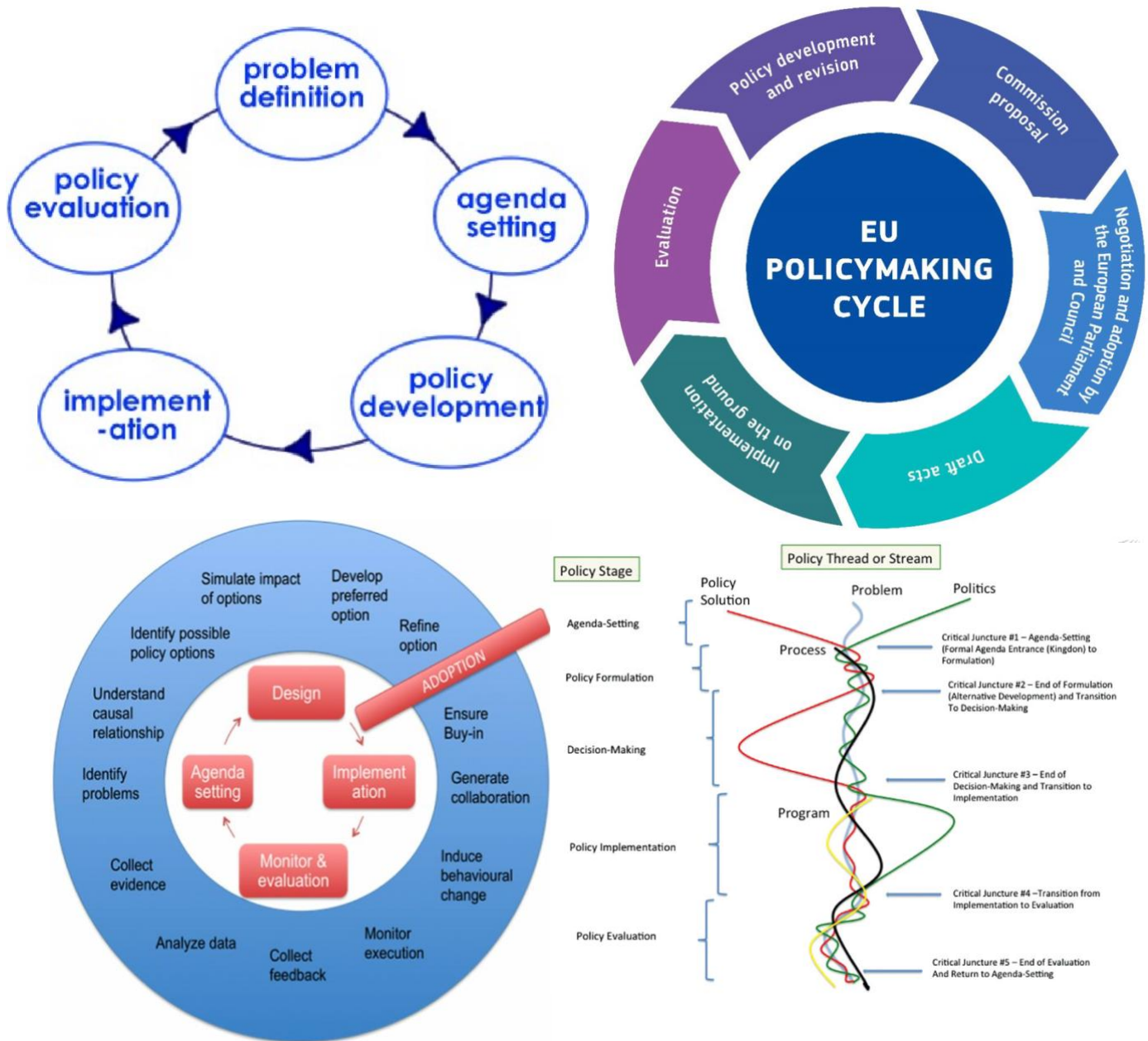
This paper explores the possible uses of evaluation in policy processes. Policymaking is often presented as a cycle, as originally proposed by Lasswellⁱ in 1957 (figure 1 on next page). The cycle moves through different stages of policy making: setting the agenda, formulating the problem, defining the aims and devising solutions, adopting a solution, implementing and evaluating. The cycle reflects a vision of policy making that emphasises rationality, linearity and government work. The European Commission, like many administrations around the world, has adopted it as an ‘ideal way’ of policy making (figure 2) and has tried to match its processes to its steps.

Of course, this is not how things ‘really work’. Indeed, the rationality of decision making is limitedⁱⁱ and knowledge is one source of decision support among others, such as beliefs, intuitions and valuesⁱⁱⁱ. Decision-making is a process that usually goes through several rounds^{iv}, involving many actors at many levels, including outside government, all of whom have different knowledge needs^v. These actors often form coalitions, which have different agendas^{vi} (and may prioritise the search for evidence to support their views rather than the search for truth^{vii}). Governments do not control the agenda of policy making, which depends more on the emergence of ‘windows of opportunity’^{viii}: knowledge needs to be available when these windows emerge, but the timing of their emergence cannot always be predicted). The process of policy making itself is not linear, but rather can be seen as a process of *muddling through*, in which the steps of the policy cycle are not followed sequentially, but rather are disjointed, and so on^{ix}.

Policy making has been better described as a collective, multi-level, multi-actor, political, iterative... process (figure 4). Different metaphors to discuss it include a whirlpool, a rollercoaster, threads or streams. But it is also familiar to civil servants, which is why it is still valuable for educational purposes. In the following pages, we are using the cycle to explore the uses of evaluation processes and outputs, with an important caveat: we do not see evaluation as a step, but as a process or a source of knowledge that can be useful at different moments in policy

* This paper focuses on retrospective evaluations and non-experimental settings. Both ex ante evaluations and experiments may have additional or different uses in the policy cycle process. It is adapted and translated from Delahais, T., & Devaux-Spatarakis, A. (2022). *Qu’attendre de la recherche pour éclairer l’action publique ?* (229; Papiers de recherche). Agence Française de Développement. <https://www.cairn.info/qu-attendre-de-la-recherche-pour-eclairer-l-action--1000000148971-page-1.htm>. The literature supporting this paper is available from the above report.

processes; in many different ways; we consider evaluation as one source of knowledge among others, that are important for policy making (figure 3); and while individual evaluations can influence specific decisions, we assume that only through accumulation and 'routinisation' can they be truly influential.



Different representations of the policy cycle. From top to bottom and left to right: 1) The original representation of the policy cycle by Lasswell; 2) The Better Regulation EU policymaking cycle, which merges the policy cycle and the institutional process of policy making in the European Union; 3) A policy cycle emphasizing some of the tasks entailed by each step of policymaking^x; 4) An attempt to merge the policy cycle with policy streams^{xi}.

Uses throughout the cycle

In general, evaluation results and processes are used for instrumental, conceptual or symbolic purposes. “**Instrumental**” use describes the use of evaluations to solve problems and is better represented by the implementation of recommendations. “**Conceptual**” use refers to how evaluation can be used to “illuminate” some policy issues by providing concepts, ideas. A typical conceptual use is when stakeholders see the problems they want to address differently after the evaluation. “**Symbolic**” use relates to how evaluation can be used for political or strategic purposes, for example, when the credibility of the evaluation process is used to support a policy change (regardless of the actual content of the evaluation)^{xii}.

Frequent, institutionalised evaluation processes contribute to raising the level of competence or organisational capacity of public authorities and other stakeholders, through meetings in the evaluation process, exchanges between different types of stakeholders, associated training or capacity building events. They help to build or use new skills among public officials and other actors, create new opportunities for interaction, or bring together actors who do not normally interact. They can help influence attitudes towards evaluation or, more generally, the use of empirical evidence in policymaking. Taken together, these factors are potentially conducive to better use of evaluation.

Evaluation can bring new frameworks, concepts, methods or tools that are useful for policy-making. For example, an evaluability process can be used to improve policy formulation; theories of change can be developed in evaluation and then used for implementation; indicators can be used for monitoring; and so on. The combination of evaluation and research has the potential to bring alternative or radically different frameworks or concepts that can significantly change the way public problems are framed or solutions considered.

Similarly, evaluation can influence the way information or data is used at all stages of policy making, typically by challenging what “good” looks like for a particular policy in a particular context, or by showing how measurements imposed by supranational or national organisations reflect worldviews and values. For example, evaluation can help to look at the rationale and impact of economic policies differently, by looking at them from the perspective of quality of life rather than competitiveness, and suggest different criteria and indicators to assess their value.

Setting the agenda

In general, evaluations are unlikely to set the agenda for decision making, in the sense that the actual triggering of a decision-making process depends on complex relationships between problem framing in the policy sphere, the maturity of policy solutions and political entrepreneurs willing to use these issues to gain traction.

However, the evaluation process and findings do allow some important issues to be identified, discussed, re-framed and given an idea of their scale. In most cases this is not so much a 'big discovery' as the accumulation of work and the gradual building of controversy and then consensus around an issue. The consensus may be about the need for change, or about the legal or regulatory steps that need to be taken to bring about that change.

Evaluation work can support coalitions of stakeholders who push for issues to be put on the agenda. Within these coalitions, evaluation knowledge can be used to consolidate stakeholder coalitions (by reinforcing some of their beliefs), to defend against the arguments of opponents, to persuade decision-makers to support a proposal, and to change public opinion.

Finally, political entrepreneurs can use the knowledge gained from evaluation to promote a solution to a particular problem. This is particularly the case before elections, when it comes to building a programme, but it may be less so once in power.

Problem formulation

Evaluations can help to challenge a public policy and its underlying assumptions, to help frame the problem differently. They can enable stakeholders to become aware of framing effects. For example, a policy may see SMEs as a homogeneous category and managers as primarily motivated by profit, and an evaluation may show that there are different groups and motivations (e.g. keeping people in work). Integrated or horizontal evaluation can help to take better account of the interdependence of problems and help policy makers to realize that different interventions need to be articulated to hope to solve or mitigate problems. This insight may lead to a change in the way problems are framed, either more narrowly or more broadly.

Evaluation can update existing knowledge about a particular issue. Evaluation, in particular, can help to understand whether problems framed at the supra-national or national level apply to the local context. It can give a better idea of the scale of the problem or its local specificities. It can help to identify which social groups, organisations or areas are benefiting or being harmed by policies. This is typically an expected benefit of horizontal approaches such as gender or social inclusion evaluation.

Making the evaluation process transparent and collaborative can also enable all stakeholders or coalitions of stakeholders to build expertise and, where necessary, to put forward a counter-discourse on what is or is not the problem.

In general, this contribution of evaluation is more likely to come from the gradual 'enlightenment' of stakeholders in the policy-making process than from single evaluations.

Policy formulation and adoption

In general, evaluations can help to clarify what are desirable outcomes for public policies. The discussion of evaluation questions and the judgement process in evaluations help to reveal conflicts of values between stakeholders and shed light on ambiguities in the formulation of objectives. This can lead to a clarification of the goals or objectives of public interventions. Evaluations can also help to formulate more and different policy choices for the future, especially when they are articulated with foresight or policy design processes. These policy choices can be supported by: 1) a theory of change, which can then serve as a backbone for the formulation of future policies, 2) concrete solutions, in the form of a "fix" to problems identified during the evaluation, or 3) concepts or solutions used elsewhere (e.g. based on a benchmarking exercise).

In general, evaluation can be used to avoid the adoption of 'generic' solutions to public problems, or to adapt these generic solutions to the local context and conditions on the ground.

Allocation of resources, execution and delivery mechanisms

Contextualised analysis developed in evaluations can be used to adapt supra-national or national policy objectives and associated resources to make them more appropriate and relevant at the local level. Evaluation has an important role to play in reformulating generic objectives so that they can be tracked and evaluated. For example, evaluation can be used to clarify how different stakeholders or departments in an administration can contribute to expected outcomes.

An ongoing process of evaluation can also help managers in the administration to develop routines for translating policy or general expectations (such as 'upgrading the skills of the workforce' or 'increasing competitiveness') into targets, tools or measures that are adapted to their needs.

Implementation and stakeholder uptake

Evaluations play a crucial role in better understanding implementation processes, which are usually a major factor in the success of programmes. They help to identify the gap between how interventions should work in theory (as they have been formulated) and how they work in practice (depending on how different actors take up the intervention, how beneficiaries respond, etc.). They are also an opportunity to set up the monitoring systems needed to steer programmes and adapt them based on the response on the ground.

In general, the actors involved in implementation (whether on the side of the administration, different implementing bodies, beneficiaries or other organisations) can learn from evaluation to adapt their practices. This is more likely if the evaluation process is participatory and transparent, and if specific measures are taken to strengthen ownership of the results.

ⁱ LASSWELL, H. D. (1971), *A Pre-View of Policy Sciences*. Policy Sciences Book Series. New York: American Elsevier Pub. Co.

ⁱⁱ ALLISON GRAHAM T. (1971), *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Little Brown

ⁱⁱⁱ KEENEY, R. L. (1996), *Value-focused thinking: Identifying decision opportunities and creating alternatives*.

^{iv} WEISS, CAROL H. (1980), "Knowledge Creep and Decision Accretion." *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* Vol 1(3), 381–404.

^v HOOGHE, L., MARKS, G. (2001). "Multi-Level Governance in the European Union". in *Multi-Level Governance and European Integration*. Governance in Europe Series. Rowman & Littlefield publishers.

^{vi} SABATIER, P.A., WEIBLE, C.M. (2007). "The Advocacy Coalition Framework. Innovations and Clarifications". In Sabatier, Paul A., ed. 2007. *Theories of the Policy Process*. 2nd ed. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press.

^{vii} INGOLD, J. ET MONAGHAN, M. (2016). Evidence translation: An exploration of policy makers' use of evidence. *Policy et Politics*, 44(2), 171-190.

^{viii} KINGDON, J. (1984), *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*. The Book Service.

^{ix} LINDBLOM, C. E. (1959), *The Science of "Muddling Through"*. *Public Administration Review*, 19(2).

^x ARMENIA, S. (2014). "Chapter 22: A Living Roadmap for Policymaking 2.0". in Sonntagbauer, P., Nazemi, K., Sonntagbauer, S., Prister, G., & Burkhardt, D. (Éds.). (2014). *Handbook of Research on Advanced ICT Integration for Governance and Policy Modeling*: IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-6236-0>

^{xi} HOWLETT, M. (2019). Moving policy implementation theory forward: A multiple streams/critical juncture approach. *Public Policy and Administration*, 34(4), 405-430.

^{xii} For a synthesis on evaluation uses, see ALKIN, M. C., & KING, J. A. (2017). Definitions of Evaluation Use and Misuse, Evaluation Influence, and Factors Affecting Use. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 38(3), 434-450. For an overview of the current debates on evaluation uses, see DELAHAIS, T., DEVAUX-SPATARAKIS, A., REVILLARD, A., & RIDDE, V. (2021). "À quoi sert l'évaluation ?" in *Évaluation. Fondements, Controverses et Perspectives* (Sciences du Bien Commun).

