How To Conduct an Effective Policy Analysis

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To ensure that a policy is fully analyzed, understood, and implemented effectively, it is necessary to conduct a policy analysis.

In his book, *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis: The Eightfold Path to More Effective Problem Solving*, Eugene Bardach, a professor at the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, discusses an effective and efficient eight-step process to follow when conducting a policy analysis. Below, I quickly outline each step and provide a few insights and tools that will assist your analysis. Steps 1 through 4 focuses on framing the analysis, while steps 5 through 8 emphasize doing the analysis.

1. **Define the Problem:** The problem should discuss the undesired gap between as-is condition and to-be condition. The most important policy problems are ill-structured, wicked problems that are difficult to resolve. It is important to note that if you misdiagnose the problem, the policy solution is likely to fail.

2. **Assemble Some Evidence:** To communicate the problem to the audience, you need to be sure that there is evidence that the problem does indeed exist. This evidence should be strong enough to make your audience care about the problem and want to read further about solutions to address the problem.

3. **Construct the Alternatives:** Alternatives should be ways to address or eliminate the policy problem. In constructing alternatives, one can utilize several techniques: (1) copy an existing policy without modification, (2) copy an existing policy and modify it to fit your needs, (3) build a policy utilizing generic tools, and (4) build a policy from scratch with creativity and brainstorming. Alternatives should be tightly linked to your problem definition, specific enough to be actionable, relevant to your client's resources, and materially different from one another. You should try to include at least three to five alternatives and at least one of these should be a "do-nothing" option. It is important not to choose dummy alternatives or pick a favorite alternative, as this will disrupt the analysis's validity and reliability.

4. **Select the Evaluation Criteria:** Criteria are used to measure the outcomes and impacts of each alternative. Bardach describes them as the "mental standards for evaluating the results of action." The criteria should be measurable and quantifiable. There are several criteria commonly utilized by policy analysts: (1) efficacy, (2) cost, (3) equity, (4) administrative feasibility, (5) unintended consequences, (6) sustainability, and (7) political feasibility. The criteria will enable you to evaluation each alternative across the same metrics in order to ultimately

determine the best policy option. Therefore, criteria should be chosen based on outcomes and impacts policy leaders would like to see from a policy option.

5. **Project the Outcomes:** Evaluate each policy alternative based on the criteria. Sometimes, this process will enable you to clearly eliminate policy alternatives that do not produce desired outcomes and impacts. However, it is often difficult to pinpoint the most effective policy alternative from this process.

6. **Confront the Trade-Offs:** As a clear policy "winner" is often not produced from the above analysis, it is important to look at trade-offs between the policy alternatives to identify the best alternative. This includes conducting a cost-benefit analysis, cost-effectiveness analysis, or multi-attribute analysis. Ultimately, you should be able to produce 2-3 crystal clear sentences on what your clients gets and gives up from choosing a certain policy alternative.

7. **Decide:** Choose a policy alternative based on your analysis.

8. **Tell Your Story:** In recounting the process to the client, it is important to clearly tell the story; trade detail for brevity. You should consider three types of audiences, (1) those that will spend 30 seconds reading your analysis, (2) those that will spend 3 minutes, and (3) those that will spend 30 minutes. Your analysis should provide enough information to satisfy all three types of readers and enable them to understand your process and ultimate recommendation.

By following these steps, you will ensure that you effectively and efficiently assess a policy before implementation or making alterations. This will guarantee that policy leaders understand all of the potential positive and negative outcomes from a specific policy choice and action.