THE POLICY CYCLE

What is a policy cycle? Well it is a somewhat artificial construction that is supposed to map out the way policy is made. A basic version is something like this:

- A problem is identified
- The problem is studied
- Options are prepared for a solution
- The options are studied
- An option is chosen
- The option is implemented
- The problem is solved

There are other versions that are a little more complicated:

One standardized version includes the following stages:

- Agenda setting (Problem identification)
- Policy Formulation
- Adoption
- Implementation
- Evaluation

An eight-step policy cycle is commonly used:

- Issue identification
- Policy analysis
- Policy instrument development
- Consultation (which permeates the entire process)
- Coordination
- Decision
- Implementation
- Evaluation

So for example if you are working on a policy to say reduce smoking you might have a cycle that looks like this:

- Smoking is identified as a key public health problem.
- Research shows a number of options to reduce smoking.
- Those options are considered by policy makers
- An option is chosen that evidence shows will be most effective.
- That option is presented to the public.
- The option is implemented.
After a certain amount of time, studies are done to see if it has reduced smoking and improved health.

Looking at the world this way, authors of policy papers need to consider at what point they are intervening in the cycle and how they want to frame their arguments. Is the paper being introduced to identify a policy or to analyse policy options. This might shape the content and structure of a paper.

For example at the agenda setting stage of the cycle, it would be better to put the emphasis on identifying a key problem that should be made a priority. Answers to the problem at this stage are less important than making sure an idea gets to the top of the list.

Later it may be more important to push policy responses and to back these with clear arguments as to their merits and disadvantages.

The policy cycle is a heuristic device -- aimed at simplifying a complex process. It would be easy if the world worked that way. Those trying to influence policy would have a number of opportunities to do so – in the identification of the problems, the choice of options for a solution, the selection of the option and the means of implementation.

However it can be useful to make the writer think about the audience and that is always key when writing a policy document or a speech.

In reality, policymaking is far more complicated than suggested by any policy cycle and it is rarely as neat or orderly. While it is useful to bear in mind this device, don’t rely on it entirely.

For example, in the process of deciding what is a key priority for a policy maker, any number of factors can be involved. Political parties have ideologies, supporters and constituencies that all may be involved. Policies may be determined or constrained by international agreements or supra-national organisations such as the European Union. Different powerbrokers – particularly those from business and finance – may have a significant impact on policy. The image of a political leadership may be important – there may be pressure to do something even when none of the options available are likely to make much of a difference.

If we go back to the example of an anti-smoking campaign the real policy process might look something like this:

- The Ministry of Health wants to reduce smoking.
- The Ministry of Finance, which benefits from taxes on cigarettes, does not.
An emerging anti-smoking lobby pushes the issue up the agenda but the tobacco companies do everything to push it back down. The result is a stalemate.

The government, wanting a short-term boost in revenues, pushes for higher taxes.

The tobacco companies don’t oppose higher taxes as they know that smuggling of their brands will undermine the policy.

Higher taxes are implemented without studying any other options as issues like larger health warnings, childhood education, plain packaging or an advertising ban are all opposed by the industry.

Higher taxes lead to smuggling from a neighbouring country with no controls over tobacco. Tax revenues decline.

The government institutes cuts due to the revenue decline, cutting other anti-tobacco programs run by the ministry of health so no follow up study is done.

Policymaking is less of a neat cycle and more like the schematic diagram of a nuclear power station with dozens of inputs and outputs, feedback systems, valves and potential blockages. Policy cycles say nothing about power or politics and present policy making as an entirely rational process – it is anything but that. Excessive reliance on this sort of analysis is a problem.

Instead of relying on a simple policy cycle process, try to add in additional elements of analysis by thinking about where power lies in this system and how it is influenced. Writing a policy paper for a bureaucracy that does not make decisions but only implements a project is a very different task than writing a document for a minister who might be able to change a position. Think about where power lies and how decisions are really made in this system. A paper written for a system that does not actually exist is not going to be useful.