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Public Policies and Policy Programs
Let's talk about public projects
by Stanslaw Gasik, PhD

Let's talk about public projects [1]

Public Policies and Policy Programs [2]

Stanisław Gasik

Introduction

Programs are implemented in all sectors of the economy: private, government, and non-government. Are principles, rules, goals, and sets of stakeholders the same or similar in all sectors? Can solutions developed for other sectors be directly implemented in the government sector? Are the success criteria for a government program defined the same way as the success criteria for a commercial program?

I will try to sketch the answers to these questions in this article.

Public policy programs

Each public administration unit implements programs related to its scope of operation. Schools, hospitals, and post offices carry out programs for the renovation of their own facilities, staff development, or restructuring in general. Such programs consist of projects and operations and are used to implement the organization's strategy. Programs implemented within one organization are called **organizational programs** (Gasik, 2023b). If such programs consist only of projects, i.e. they are **project programs**, then existing standards, such as the Standard for Program Management PMI (2017), can be used to manage them. But these standards are not applicable to **operational** and **mixed programs**.

But the concept of a program in public administration also has another, more important, meaning. Governments, or more precisely, the ruling political parties, define and implement **public policies**, the main components of which are intentions to act. A government may have the policy to encourage doctors to immigrate and also a policy to develop the submarine fleet. A government may have a policy of equal pay for the genders. A government policy may be to protect a particular species of animal threatened with extinction. Another policy may be the provision of public services over

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[1] Editor's note: This article is the second in a series related to the management of public programs and projects, those organized, financed and managed by governments and public officials. The author, Dr. Stanisław Gasik, is the author of the book "*Projects, Government, and Public Policy*", recently published by CRC Press / Taylor and Francis Group. That book and these articles are based on Dr. Gasik's research into governmental project management around the world over the last decade. Stanisław is well-known and respected by PMWJ editors; we welcome and support his efforts to share knowledge that can help governments worldwide achieve their most important initiatives.

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the Internet, and another may be the development of winter sports. For a public policy to be implemented, a certain set of actions must be carried out. And here we come to the second meaning of the term program**: it is a way of implementing public policy**.

We call such programs **policy programs**. Policy programs can also consist of projects and operations. The development of winter sports can be implemented through the construction of sports facilities, participation in events (projects) but primarily through long-term, systematic recruitment and training of athletes (operations). Policy programs, like public policies, usually involve multiple public organizations.

Public policy plays a special role in the life cycle of policy programs. It is the main document that determines whether a policy program can be launched. In this sense, it corresponds to the business case of private sector programs.

The structure of policy program stakeholders

The most general, ultimate goal of any organization is the continuation of its existence. Commercial enterprises, which are autonomous entities, strive to stay in the market by obtaining the needed level of profit. And the profit results from matching their offer, products, or services to the needs of customers participating in the market game.

In the public sector, the most important autonomous organization is the government (consisting of several branches and a host of subordinate organizations). The government, except in extreme situations like war, is not in danger of ceasing its existence. On the other hand, the entities that are not assured of permanence of operation, and have a decisive influence on the functioning of governments, are **political parties**. "Currency", enabling them to exist and operate, is support from the public, measured by the number of votes collected in elections.

Political parties gain social support through the compliance of their policies with society's expectations and the effectiveness of policy programs. Social expectations can be shaped by the promotion of their goals by parties or vice versa: parties are formed and shape their policies on the basis of the expectations of at least certain groups of citizens.

The public shape the directions of government actions directly or indirectly. The most direct way for citizens to decide on the actions of governments is through referendums. In some countries (e.g. Switzerland) this is a relatively common way of decision-making. For example, citizens there have decided in this way on banning full facial coverings or on a trade partnership with Indonesia. In most countries, referendums are used to make decisions of constitutional importance. And an indirect way for the public to decide the direction of the state, that is, the content of policies and their programs is through **the election to representative bodies of politicians and political groups** with certain preferences. Society and the ruling parties are the most important stakeholders of public policies and programs. Political entities that are not part of the government are the **opposition**. Political groups become the opposition because they do not accept some or all of the public policies and programs of the ruling groups.
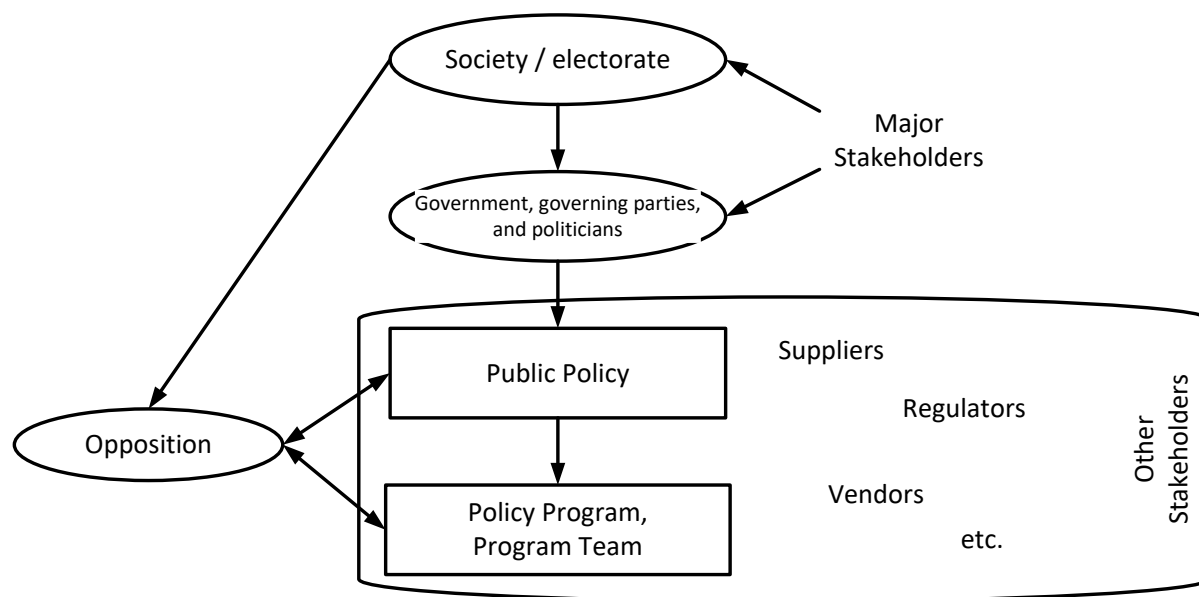
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Figure 1. Public policies, policy programs, and their stakeholders

We do not include the opposition among the main stakeholders of policy programs because it does not have a governing influence on their definition and implementation.

Policy program success

In the context outlined above, the issue of the success of policies and their programs can be addressed. The success of a policy program is assessed primarily from the point of view of the above-mentioned most important groups of its stakeholders: the society (or its groups) and the politicians who define it, i.e. the ruling party. For society, the program should guarantee certain benefits, for example, reducing the number of cases of a certain disease or shortening the time of settling matters in public institutions. These should be benefits defined in public policies. The implementation of the policy program should also bring benefits to political parties whose primary goal is to stay in power – in order to further improve the state in accordance with their own preferences, or at least to ensure the benefits of individuals in power. From this point of view, a policy program is successful when, thanks to its implementation, the electorate of the ruling party increases, and perhaps even the ruling coalition expands. This improves the election prospects of the government and its leaders (McConnell, 2010).

Policy program initiation

Since policy programs are defined on the basis of policies, **the essential step in defining policy programs is defining public policies**. There are two main modes of policy initiation. The government can change its preferences in a certain area of operation. For example, in the area of local administration, instead of centralization, it may begin to delegate powers to units of such administration. Or, instead of combustion cars, it may start to prefer electric cars. The second type of policy definition is the interest of the government in a new area of the state's functioning. For example,

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interventions in the area of cybersecurity may become necessary, which was not important before the spread of the Internet. To complete the set, you need to add government withdrawal from certain areas, which is called deregulation. For example, the abolition of formal requirements for certain professions.

The substantive rationale may not be sufficient to define or change public policy. Increasing the number of medical staff may be a component of the policy of increasing the capacity in the field of health services. The cheapest economical way to attract medical specialists could be to recruit them from other countries. However, citizens may prefer doctors from their own culture and politicians should consider this when deciding to educate their specialists – even if such a process is more difficult, expensive, and takes longer. Same with power generation. Even if the optimal way of obtaining it is nuclear power plants, society may be against them and public policy should take this into account. That is, when defining public policies and their programs, one must take into account the decisive political factor that may affect the success of the ruling party. In order to define a new public policy, an appropriate political situation must first arise – which may or may not be correlated to substantive or managerial premises.

Defining policies and their programs may require enacting laws, implementing regulations, and financial or organizational solutions. Well-organized governments have procedures describing how these activities are to be carried out, but the most important space of activities needed for this is politics. There are several explanatory models in this area for defining public policies. They are not prescriptive – it is difficult to order politicians to define policies according to any scheme.

A model of political decision-making, called the **economic model**, was built by Downs (1957). According to this model, it is believed that the electorate and political parties behave rationally and try to maximize their benefits. Voters try to get the most out of their options, while politicians try to get the benefits for their parties. Politicians most often try to follow the preferences of the electorate. That is, policies are formulated based on the expectations of their most important stakeholders - voters. In this model, it is believed that social behavior, i.e. defining policies, can be explained by aggregating or averaging the preferences of individual stakeholders: voters and politicians.

The **organizational model** of political decision-making was defined by Allison (1971). This model is limited to government behavior. The policy is assessed separately by individual organizational units, for example, departments. Health policy may be reviewed by, for example, the health department, the finance department, the employment department, and the education department. The central decision-making body (cabinet) reviews the results of these analyses and on their basis makes the final decision on the implementation of the policy. Such a model is called an organizational model because it only uses individual organizational units.

Kingdon (2003) defined the **Multiple Stream Framework**. In order to start defining policy in a certain area, appropriate conditions must arise in three streams. First, there must be a sufficiently intense social problem. For example, unemployment is increasing in a certain area or for people with specific qualifications. Second, there must be people who want to deal with this problem and propose a solution (the so-

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called **policy entrepreneurs**). These people are usually not decision-makers, so the issue must also attract the interest of politicians. Public media usually play a big role in attracting the interest of politicians. When all three of these conditions come together in one period, a **policy window** is created that allows the policy to be reformulated.

Public policies (and their programs) are rather stable for most of the functioning of governments. At certain times, certain topics attract special attention from the public and, in turn, from politicians as well. For example, the invention of new technology. Or the discovery of mineral deposits. Or global warming, or an aging population. Such events necessitate a new approach to certain issues, defining new policies and the programs that implement them (True et al., 2019). This understanding of the dynamics of public policies is called **punctuated equilibrium**.

To temper the unfettered, arbitrary activities of politicians, in some countries they themselves are trying to systematize and orient the processes of defining public policies to real social problems and needs. At the federal level in the United States, the **Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act** (US Congress, 2018) was enacted. It mandates that government agencies identify policy problems and collect data on those problems. Agencies must also have analytical methods developed to support defining policies.

The variety of models for defining public policies shows the complexity and multifaceted nature of this problem. After defining the policy, it is "enough" to build a policy program that implements it.

PMI Standard for Program Management and Public Administration

Can the PMI Standard for Program Management be used to manage policy programs?

Even at the level of vocabulary, it is clear that this standard is not geared toward public administration. This sector, for example, uses the term "public value" rather than PMI's "social or societal value." Policy programs are implemented to achieve public policy objectives but this notion is not found in the PMI standard using only the "business case" term, which comes from the private sector. The main predefined stakeholders of each policy and policy program are society, politicians, and opposition. None of them appears in the PMI standard. It warns against the propensity to resist change as if it were the main public attitude toward programs in a democratic society. In fact, it would be fair to point out that policies and programs almost by definition, due to the democratic nature of government (such is what we are concerned with) have public support. Resistance, or at least reluctance, to implement policy programs is more common in states where their rulers do not have to take into account public preferences, i.e. in authoritarian systems. If anything, special attention should be paid to not losing this support.

The PMI Stakeholder identification process requires the identification of stakeholders for each program. In fact, the most important relationship is just the opposite. It is the main stakeholders: the public and its representatives – politicians – who define public policies (and their programs). The PMI standard is designed for organizations where the owner decides what to do and after that looks around for stakeholders. In

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democratic countries, the situation is the opposite: we think together about what to do and then make a decision. This guarantees the support of the majority of stakeholders.

The PMI Standard for Program Management, in many of its main elements, is not geared toward or adapted to the realities of the public sector.

Summary and conclusion

Policy programs in democratic countries are defined and implemented based on the political situation, resulting from the preferences of the public and the politicians who represent them. Using the project management language developed in the PMI environment, these are the main stakeholders of policy programs. They are the ones who define public policies and policy programs. The initiation of policy programs has two components: political and substantive. Also, the success of public programs is evaluated from these two perspectives. Existing program management standards are primarily geared toward private programs. They also do not cover mixed programs, consisting of projects and operations, very common in the public sector.

Developing a special management standard for public programs should be considered.

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Dr. Stanisław Gasik, PMP is a project management expert. He graduated from the University of Warsaw, Poland, with M. Sc. in mathematics and Ph. D. in organization sciences (with a specialty in project management). Stanisław has over 30 years of experience in project management, consulting, teaching, and implementing PM organizational solutions. His professional and research interests include project knowledge management, portfolio management, and project management maturity. He is the author of the only holistic model of project knowledge management spanning from the individual to the global level.

Since 2013, his main professional focus has been on public projects. He was an expert in project management at the Governmental Accountability Office, an institution of the US Congress. He is the author of "Projects, Government, and Public Policy," a book that systematizes knowledge about government activities in the area of project management.

He was a significant contributor to PMI's PMBOK® Guide and PMI Standard for Program Management and contributed to other PMI standards. He has lectured at global PMI and IPMA congresses and other international conferences.

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