# What is the Policy Problem?

*Methodological Challenges in Policy Evaluation*

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Because when a policy process starts, nobody knows what line of action will eventually be implemented, policy evaluation has to continuously examine the content of different policy components. In order to understand and explain public policy, different stakeholders' perceptions of the policy problem need to be scrutinized. A policy evaluation should also facilitate the interpretation of policy in a broader context. What values and order does the policy or programme promote? Using an open evaluation framework and a mix of criteria can facilitate a broader interpretation of the policy process. In this article, problems undertaking policy evaluation are discussed in relation to a Swedish medical informatics programme.

KEYWORDS: lines of rationality; policy evaluation; policy learning; policy problem; stakeholders

## Introduction

When a policy process starts, nobody knows who gets 'What, When and How' (Lasswell, 1958) or what line of action will eventually be implemented. Where a policy is made and implemented in multi-actor contexts, the various stakeholders frequently view problems and solutions differently and some will try to influence the aim and direction of a policy all the way through the policy process. This situation calls for open evaluation frameworks and for more attention to be paid to different rationalities and lines of argument.

   The aim of this article is both to discuss the nature and the problems inherent in undertaking policy evaluation, and to make a contribution to policy evaluation methodology. A postpositivist framework, developed to evaluate public policy, is briefly presented. Instead of a step-by-step account of the methodology, some salient problems confronting policy evaluators will be discussed more thoroughly. These include: how to create policy learning within a policy process in general and, more specifically, how to identify stakeholders in the policy process; the definition of the policy problem; evaluators' intervention; and the differences between rationality in theory and practice. The article ends with a discussion of implications for evaluation practice.

## Nature of Policy Evaluation

A basic characteristic of policy evaluation is that changes generally take place throughout the policy process: the object of evaluation is a moving target. Some of these changes will affect the evaluation and some may cause problems to the evaluator. This is often the case in real-time evaluation, and because real-time evaluations have become more common over the last 10 to 15 years, the question of how to deal with policy change in evaluation needs to be discussed thoroughly.

Real-time evaluation (RTE) refers, in this article, to progressive forms of policy evaluation that follow policy processes underway. RTE scrutinizes dynamic processes. Such processes can be distinguished by uncertainty; for example aims or means may change and new actors can enter the policy process. Accordingly, nobody can foresee what line of action will be implemented in the end. The pre-condition of uncertainty implies that designing RTE is somewhat like preparing to report a game without a referee. You know that there will be players out on the field, but you do not know how the game will proceed, who will score or which team will win. The rules of the game might also change. In real-time processes, where stakeholders are involved, problem definitions, goals, actors, resources, restrictions etc. are not always known in advance, and the content of these components may change during the policy process. If a real-time evaluation should do justice to what is going on, and at the same time be useful to practitioners in improving their practice, it needs to be sensitive to policy change.

Another premise is that public policy is generally developed in multi-actor contexts. However, evaluators often overlook this or openly choose to give the commissioners more influence on various parts of the evaluation, such as the design of the evaluation, the definition of the policy problem, evaluation questions and draft reports. It is presumed that those who pay have the right to know what they pay for and subsequently be given more influence. But, if the evaluation should do justice to the real conditions under which a policy is made and implemented, it must take into account different stakeholders' views and arguments, including those who fail to influence the definition of the policy problem. However, this is not generally the case in mainstream evaluations. Most policy evaluations are goal-oriented and biased to the commissioners' perceptions. Considering different stakeholders' arguments is more urgent today because the state and its representatives no longer have unquestioned authority and legitimacy. The state, and various levels of government, are actors in the policy process and should be treated on equal terms with others. The state's legal authority and formal decisions do not inform us about how the implementation of a policy will evolve.

Various evaluation approaches have been developed to cope with problems related to changes in policy processes and to conditions in multi-actor contexts, and subsequently in response to shortcomings in goal-oriented and positivist evaluations (Fischer, 1995, 1998; Chelimsky, 1997; Cook, 1997). One group of responses can be described as postpositivist responses and the framework presented in this article is developed within this discourse.

## *Postpositivist Policy Evaluation*

What characterizes the postpositivist response? First, it comprises a wide range of approaches and should be understood as a group of responses or alternatives rather than one clear and coherent approach. Postpositivists disassociate themselves from rational, value-free, positivist assumptions. Critics of rational policy analysis and evaluation argue that the first generation of value-free policy analysis and evaluation was an illusion (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Torgerson, 1986, 1992; Fischer and Forester, 1987; Deleon, 1994; Fischer, 1995, 1998). They question whether socio-political phenomena can be analysed by separating facts and values. They reject the positivist claim of being more scientific and the possibility of arriving at one indisputable truth by using scientific methods and logic. On the contrary, postpositivists argue that social phenomena like public policy need to be scrutinized from different points of view and with various techniques. In order to justify the use of multi-methodological approaches, which postpositivists believe is necessary to obtain empirical validity, there is a need to anchor such approaches in some kind of pluralistic or relativistic epistemology. Thus, the postpositivist approaches belong to a pluralist and hermeneutic tradition (Albaeck, 1989–90; Albaeck, 1995; Bernstein, 1983; Torgerson, 1985, 1995, 1996; Fischer, 1998).

There are three endeavours that unite most postpositivist analysts: they are all engaged in developing empirical, interpretive and critical enquiry (Bernstein, 1976: 243 in Torgerson, 1985). They deliberately depart from a positivist and technocratic world-view, and in different ways question scientific objectivism.

It should be emphasized that some postpositivists seek to combine the best from positivism and hermeneutics and do not think that methods used in positivist analysis must be completely abandoned. On the contrary, positivist techniques can be justified and used within a hermeneutic framework. Accordingly, when positivist methods and techniques are used by postpositivist evaluators, they are used critically, together with other methodologies, and without assumptions of scientific objectivism. The dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative methods is also questioned, primarily because all methods in some sense are qualitative. Postpositivists analyse all types of texts and sources and do not assume that statistical methods and accounts generate more valid knowledge. Discourse analysis, for example, can illuminate the basic conditions for policy making by scrutinizing what can be said and what is considered as relevant knowledge within the dominant discourse (Fischer, 1995; Hansen, 2000).

Within this family of approaches, an evaluation can be framed in many ways, but no design can cover everything. All frameworks will be limited in scope and depth. However, knowing that an inquiry is always partial does not stop postpositivists from trying to capture the overall situation. Postpositivist evaluators seek to illuminate the value dimension in public policy as well as in their own accounts, because all the stages in a policy process and in an evaluation are imbued with values.

## Policy Evaluation Framework

To cope with the dynamics inherent in policy processes, a broad evaluation framework is suggested in this article. The framework is developed as part of the broader postpositivist discourse briefly described above. The overall purpose of the framework is to enhance practical and theoretical learning from the processes and outcomes of public policy. The framework (see Table 1) shows the aspects and dimensions on which the evaluation will focus. It also serves as a checklist for gathering data (cf. Geva-May & Wildavsky, 1997: 7ff.; Costongs and Springett, 1997).

The framework is constructed from four basic categories or components. All four 'components' are essential to help understand and explain a policy in its societal context. However, in practice real policy processes do not follow the logical 'steps' implied in the framework sequentially. Therefore the four components or categories should not be associated with the rational assumptions generally attached to various stages in a policy process. Policy processes are in many respects continuous processes and initiatives may start anywhere in the system (Hill, 1997b). The four categories serve the heuristic purpose of simplifying and structuring the evaluation of the policy process without making any assumptions about rationality or linearity. The evaluation will be carried out as an iterative and probing process and the evaluator must be prepared to gather data on all the components continuously.

The *problem situation*, the first component, provides the structure and direction of the evaluation. The context in which the policy operates can be described in many ways. I suggest that the policy is located in relation to the problem situation and within the socio-historical and political context in which it has been developed. Key actors and other stakeholders are identified and the evaluation unfolds the way in which they define the problem situation, what strategies they have and so forth. This serves as a baseline in the evaluation. The task is to identify those definitions of the policy problem that occur. At this stage, the evaluator also searches for relevant variables and outcome criteria. The questions focusing the problem situation are:

*Table 1.*   Framework for Real-Time Evaluation of Public Policy

| Problem  situation | Policy | Implementation | Results/consequences |
|---|---|---|---|
| Context | Goals | Line of action | Attained goals |
| Actors – stakeholders | Policy theory | Organization, competence | Unintended results |
| Problem definitions | Policy means | Resources | Effects |
| Relevant variables | Evaluation intervention | Unexpected problems | Values and order promoted |

- What is the context?
- Who are the key actors and other stakeholders?
- What is the policy problem?
- What are the relevant variables and outcome criteria?

The aim and direction of the particular *policy,* as well as different policy options, are the focus of the second component. The concept of policy refers to a line of action (or inaction) aiming to preserve or change conditions perceived as collective problems or challenges (Heclo, 1972; Hjern and Porter, 1983; Hanberger, 1997). Accordingly, a policy is always related to somebody's perceptions of the problem situation. Goal(s) and goal conflicts are illuminated and analysed. Uncovering the policy theory or programme logic is a task at this stage. The policy theory is reconstructed in relation to potential explanatory variables identified, policy options and dependent variable(s). It might surprise the reader to find 'evaluation intervention' included in the policy category. This has to do with the purpose of the evaluation. If the evaluation has a formative task, which is the case in many RTE, the evaluator is expected to be part of the policy-making process. When the evaluator intervenes, his or her role changes from observer to actor (Lasswell, 1971; Torgerson, 1985: 245). To what extent 'interventions' might affect policy is an empirical question. However, if the evaluation has a summative task, no intervention from the evaluator is expected at this stage of the process. The questions used to focus policy are:

- What are the goals? Are there goal conflicts?
- What is the policy theory or programme logic?
- What policy means can be, and are, used?
- Do evaluation interventions affect policy? (A question for formative evaluation)

The *implementation process* is the focus of the third category. It refers to how a policy, line of action or inaction is implemented. Within this framework, the line of action is turned into an empirical question. How deeply an evaluation should be elaborated at this stage depends partly on the task. The framework used here also directs attention towards organization, competence, resources and unexpected problems. The organizations used in implementing the policy need to be analysed in theory (cf. Elmore, 1978; Benson, 1983) as well as in practice. An organization may be suited for the task or could be problematic to start with. Accordingly, the evaluator will pay attention to both theoretical and implementation shortcomings related to the choice of organization (cf. Weiss, 1972). The use of resources and competence will also be scrutinized. If unexpected problems emerge, these will be addressed and the evaluator will try to find alternative ways to deal with them. The questions focusing on the implementation process are:

- What line of action is followed in practice?
- How does the implementing organization work in practice?
- Is enough competence integrated?
- Are resources used effectively and in the right way?
- Do unexpected problems occur?

The last component in the framework focuses on *results and consequences*. This does not imply that the other components will generate no evaluation results. The focus at this stage is on the outcomes and implications of the policy. The extent to which intended goals have been reached is a key issue to be addressed. Unintended results need to be illuminated as well. Intended and unintended outcomes are evaluated according to official policy goals. When attention is paid to how different stakeholders (including supposed beneficiaries) judge the results, their perceptions and line of argument may not be the same as for those in power. Within this framework the rationality of those in power is analysed on equal terms with other stakeholders' rationality. Finally immediate, intermediate and long-term effects are assessed. The task and the time available will limit the extent to which the effects can be examined.

Judging results in a multi-actor context requires a mix of criteria. The various stakeholders must find at least some of the criteria relevant, otherwise the evaluation will not have any general relevance or meaning for them. Asking key actors what they consider as relevant criteria will facilitate this (cf. component 1). The evaluator's assumptions and values should also be made explicit, because they influence the criteria selected and the interpretation of the results. The questions focusing on results are:

- To what extent are the intended goals reached?
- Are there any unexpected results?
- What are the effects?
- Who benefits from the policy?

In order to understand a policy, this framework places the policy in its societal context. A policy is not developed in isolation from other social norms and behaviour. Certain values are always promoted as part of a policy-making process. Further, as is argued in this article, how public policy and the making of policy contribute to democracy and political legitimacy also needs to be illuminated. The evaluation will, at this stage, switch focus from the micro to the macro level, i.e. from the specific to the societal level. Because of the postpositivist orientation the evaluator attempts to take the evaluation one step further than is generally done. This leads to the questions of whether the policy is well designed for the particular problem situation and what values and order it promotes. This suggests the following additional questions:

- Is the policy relevant to the problem situation?
- What values and social order does it promote?
- Does policy (making) contribute to democracy and political legitimacy?

The underlying logic in the framework should not be confused with the rationality in actual policy processes (cf. Rochefort and Cobb, 1993: 57; Hill, 1997b). Real policy processes will have their own logic and rationality, i.e. different steps or policy components can be iterated at any time in the process.

When the framework is applied, a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods will be used for gathering and analysing data, for example questionnaires,

interviews, observations and text or discourse analysis. However, these methods will not be discussed in this article.

Before discussing inherent problems in undertaking policy evaluation, a specific case of policy will briefly be presented. The case will highlight the problems under discussion and the arguments put forward in the article.

## *A Policy Case*

The policy focused on here is a programme designed as an experiment, where the aim is to develop and implement a new computer-based medical information system on the Internet. A comprehensive account of the case is presented in a final report (Hanberger, 1999). The Swedish public health and medical service organizations have, in this project, tried to work together across institutional boundaries to develop a new multimedia information system called InfoMedica. The pre-history of this project indicates that it was difficult to gain support for this project in health and medical service organizations. A group advocating new IT solutions have initiated and promoted the project. I will omit the details and only point out that the official goal of this programme is to empower citizens. There are other goals, for example economics, but these are not openly admitted.

Multimedia information on health, diseases, treatment, waiting time, patient organizations and other issues concerning ordinary citizens is assumed to lead to empowerment. Well-informed citizens will feel safer and become empowered in their relationships with medical professionals. This is how the programme is presented to the Swedish medical and health organizations as well as to the public.

The development of modern information technology of this type can be seen as part of a general public 'IT-policy' in Sweden at the end of the 20th century. It can also be recognized as a part of the health promotion strategies of the so-called 'new public health' (cf. Peterson, 1997). Writers scrutinizing the new public health have considerably broadened the focus of health promotion. The distinction between the healthy and unhealthy population totally dissolves 'since everything potentially is a source of "risk" and everyone can be seen to be "at risk" ' (Peterson, 1997: 195). The Swedish information system is planned as a complement to information provided by physicians and is intended to be an authoritative source of information on health and medical issues in a knowledge society. The new Swedish health policy seems to follow an international trend.

This brief presentation will serve as a background for focusing on emerging problems in undertaking policy evaluation. The problems will be discussed in the light of experiences gained from using the evaluation framework on different kinds of policies, but first of all in relation to this specific case. Four problems will be discussed in some detail: problems in identifying the stakeholders; who defines the policy problem; evaluation intervention and policy learning; and the difference between rationality in theory and practice.

# Problems in Undertaking Policy Evaluation

### *How to Identify Stakeholders*

To begin with we need to recognize that various stakeholders, individuals or groups may hold competing and sometimes combative views on the appropriateness of the evaluation and whose interest can be affected by the outcome. Peter Rossi and Howard Freeman recognize 10 categories of stakeholders or parties typically involved in, or affected by, evaluations (1993: 408). These are policy makers and decision makers, evaluation sponsors, target participants, programme management, programme staff, evaluators, programme competitors, contextual stakeholders and evaluation community. The same stakeholders will not only be affected by the evaluation but will first of all appreciate and view the policy differently. Evaluators need to distinguish between how the stakeholders perceive the policy on the one hand and the evaluation on the other. Stakeholders who do not value a policy to begin with, will probably welcome a negative evaluation result, and most likely stakeholders who support the policy will to some extent dislike the same result. One can also expect different readings of evaluation reports and appreciation of findings, depending on how the reader's ideological position fits with the recommendations offered by the evaluator.

In deciding which stakeholders to take account of in the evaluation, I suggest making a distinction between active and passive stakeholders. Active stakeholders, or key actors, will try to influence the policy at different stages, whereas passive stakeholders are affected by the policy, but do not actively participate in the process. The evaluator needs to recognize, and deliberately include, the interest of the latter group, otherwise the effects and value of the policy for inactive or silent stakeholders will be overlooked.

The identification of the two categories can be turned into an empirical question. One way to start the identification of active and passive stakeholders is to use a 'snowball method'. This method helps in identifying who the *key actors* are and to single out the persons to interview (Hjern and Porter, 1983; Hull and Hjern, 1987). The method used to identify a network of key actors can be compared with how a 'snowball rolls'. When others identify a person as an actor in the problem solving process, this then becomes the major criterion for regarding that person as a key actor. Key actors can comprise proponents as well as opponents of the official policy. They are actors in the sense of either contributing to the implementation of the policy or trying to change its aim and direction. Opponents are usually not thought of as contributors by those in authority. However, criticism can be of great value and what is (not) a contribution depends on whose perspective one is arguing from. As long as the 'snowball' rolls, new key actors are identified. Key actors also help the evaluator identify passive stakeholders.

If we look at the *key actors* involved in the medical information programme, they turned out to be a group of civil servants in charge of developing medical information for citizens, some computer company staff and top politicians. There were also a few actors who questioned the programme's aim and direction. The

'snowball method' helped the evaluator to identify a group of active stakeholders or key actors, but how can we be sure that this group is the right one to follow? In a programme like this, there is a limited risk of failing to identify the key actors. However, in some cases of policy this risk has to be considered. The method gives precedence to key actors who mobilize ideas and resources in the policy process. But how can the evaluator do justice to passive and silent stakeholders? One option is to suggest that policy makers bring them into the policy process, for example through focus or reference groups. If this is not possible, the evaluator needs to represent their views in communication with policy makers and in reports. At an early stage in this project 'patients' had advocates. However, these were subsequently excluded, and doctors and civil servants primarily used their own experiences in assuming and anticipating citizens' needs. The evaluator therefore had to take responsibility for citizens' needs and views and analyse these in a fair way.

If only key actors' perceptions are scrutinized, there is a risk that indirect or more structural influences will be overlooked. Key actors might not be aware of such influences and therefore the evaluator needs to pay them attention. Within this framework the structural conditions and influences are analysed within a policy's socio-historical and political context.

### Who Defines the Policy Problem?

In order to describe what is going on, and to explain processes and outcomes in real-time processes, evaluators must pay more attention to problem definitions than usual. A key question is to find out what the policy problem is. The framework proposed here starts with the assumption that a problem is a value judgement. Whether a certain condition is viewed as a problem or not depends on our perceptions and is not inherent in the condition or situation itself (Cobb and Elder, 1983; Dery, 1984; Hogwood and Gunn, 1984: 109; Fischer and Forester, 1987; Spector and Kitsuse, 1987; Fischer, 1995; Geva-May and Wildavsky, 1997).

Defining a policy problem is an act of conceptualizing collective problems or challenges to be dealt with. It involves mobilizing others in a specific way to look at problems and solutions (Jennings, 1987; Spector and Kitsuse, 1987; Fischer, 1987, 1993; Schram, 1993; Hanberger, 1997). Hence, policy problems are socially or politically created. From an ontological point of view, there are no objective policy problems. For example, Hukkinen and Rochlin (1994), in a study of toxicity and salinity problems, show that experts on irrigation and drainage identified 90 drainage-related problem statements. Few of the experts agreed on what the problem was or on the causal relationships. Some experts considered one set of variables as causes or problems and others as effects, whereas another group thought of the same variables the other way around. Because there are no objective or scientific policy problems, evaluators need to pay more attention to prevailing definitions of the policy problem. In the public domain, all levels of government can mobilize and define policy problems. Moreover, professionals, companies and pressure groups are also frequently trying to influence public policy problems. One way to deal with this situation is to turn the policy problem into an empirical question and unfold emerging and competing conceptions of the policy problem.

Who has the power to define the policy problem and to steer the implementation of a policy? If the evaluator only pays attention to the formal authority structure, there is a risk of not understanding what actually happens. Informal institutions and actors without formal responsibility can be of crucial importance in many cases. All the key actors must be heard in an evaluation.

If we take a look at the policy under consideration there was no problem analysis carried out before the programme was launched and the policy problem was unclear. However, the official policy problem could be reconstructed as 'how to develop a medical information system that can empower citizens'. When scrutinizing perceptions and strategies among stakeholders, an unofficial or hidden policy problem also turned up. The promoters and policy makers were strategically working to develop and secure the survival of the multimedia information system. Accordingly, they paid more attention to technical issues and worked strategically to find a durable institutional solution for the project. They did not bother so much about the originally defined problem and the goal of empowerment. The unofficial policy problem was reconstructed as 'how to develop and institutionalize a multimedia information system'.

Some stakeholders felt that the programme was losing direction, primarily because the unofficial policy problem was guiding the process. Three critical arguments were expressed regarding programme implementation: the lack of problem analysis; an inappropriate organization for implementing the project; and the use of over sophisticated techniques. The policy makers did not consider these arguments at all.

One of the key actors and owners of InfoMedica, the Pharmacy Company, expressed more explicitly than anyone else that the public medical service system was inefficient. They believed that more informed patients could help reduce what they considered to be over-consumption of medical care and medicine. The policy problem, according to them, was how to promote effectiveness through the use of modern information technology, and not, primarily, the empowerment of citizens. As this case shows, there was more than one policy problem expressed and one would be misled by only accepting the official policy problem.

### Evaluation Intervention and Policy Learning

In what cases should an evaluator intervene? When the evaluator intervenes, his or her role changes from observer to actor. That is why 'evaluation intervention' is conceptualized as part of the policy category in the framework (see Table 1). I would suggest that the evaluator intervenes, provided that he or she has been commissioned to do so, when (1) the policy implementation is deviating from the overall goal or when implementation problems become known; (2) if the goal(s) seem to be problematic in one way or another, for example, when the policy theory appears to be unrealistic; or (3) if a hidden agenda is disclosed. In all these cases the evaluator will eventually engage with or even challenge policy makers, depending on how they react. Their reactions cannot be predicted, but, whatever their reactions will be, the evaluator should try to act as a 'critical constructivist', that is disclose emerging problems supported with advice on how to deal with

them. The overall purpose with the evaluator's intervention is to promote learning within the policy process.

With this in mind, the first major 'evaluation intervention' in this case was orally presented at a meeting with project leaders. The 'intervention' drew attention to the fact that citizens were not adequately represented or engaged in the development of the programme. From the citizens' perspective, and according to the stated goal, this situation was unsatisfactory. At a time of legitimacy problems and when the distance between citizens and those in power is growing, technocratic policy making can be problematic. Consequently, the evaluator recommended opening new channels to give citizens and staff in the public health and medical organizations influence over the refinement and development of the information system. However, those responsible did not want citizens, or any persons not dedicated to a pure multimedia concept, to influence the development of the information system.

The second piece of advice, presented at the same meeting, had to do with the poor results achieved at that time. In practice, the production of multimedia information had been very difficult, the result was poor and technical problems had not yet reached a stable solution. The recommendation was then to consider new ways to extend the system: for examples to integrate and adjust existing text-based information without multimedia support. However, this advice was considered to be a deviation from the original plan and a decision was taken to use only 'multimedia equipped' information.

Nothing was mentioned in the minutes of the meeting about the evaluator's intervention and advice. Furthermore, the willingness to co-operate with the evaluator ceased from when these first problems were brought up. The evaluator was met with 'silence', inaction and exclusion from the policy-making system, instead of any attempt to learn from the evaluation. Looking back over the project's history suggests that critical arguments and ideas deviating from a pure multimedia concept have systematically been excluded. How should an evaluator deal with a situation like this? Reflecting on the silence and the exclusion of the evaluator, and that orally presented advice did not leave any trace, I decided to write a first evaluation report. To be sure that my account was relevant and fair, the first draft was discussed and validated with other participants in the project. Problems in the implementation process and the 'interventions' were reported and discussed in the report along with suggestions on how to deal with them. Unfortunately no dialogue between the evaluator and the policy makers followed from the first evaluation report. The board discussed it at a meeting, and the report did, according to the board's minutes, do justice to the current situation in the project. But no actions were taken to deal with the problems and the report was not disseminated. No direct effects followed from the intervention, indicating also that no policy learning took place.

During this period a private consultant was hired to investigate the future organization and propose a permanent organization for the project, that is, for the experimental phase of work. The consultant's task partly overlapped the evaluator's commission.

Policy makers have not been prepared to integrate evaluation findings in the

developing of the system. The programme managers and the board were primarily interested in using the evaluation to legitimize the project among various stakeholders and for promotion purposes. Those in authority wanted to be recognized as 'prudent and accountable in calling for the study' (Stake, 1998: 203). Only findings that could substantiate and support actions anticipated or already taken have been used. Moreover, the final report was delayed for almost four months. The reason given for this delay was that the board needed more time to consider the results. But after four months the board announced that no feedback would be communicated to the evaluator. The four months 'delay' coincided with the reorganization of the consortium into a publicly-owned company. The consultant's recommendations, which were more or less tailored by the commissioners, were implemented during this time-period. According to Robert Stake, programme evaluation can be 'an instrument of institutional promotion more than an effort at understanding its processes and quality' (Stake, 1998: 204.). This case confirms this assessment – with no room for an evaluator to contribute to policy learning within this process.

This particular policy was developed within a welfare state discourse where a political elite and experts define the problems and needs for people. The interventions made by the evaluator, intending to promote policy learning, empower citizens and gear the aim and direction of the programme to the overall programme goal, deviated too much from the policy makers' real interests and/or made too many demands. In technocratic policy making, deliberation and policy learning are limited in scope and depth. Rhetoric is used to gain acceptance for the policy.

### *Rationality in Theory and Practice*
What does this evaluation tell us about rationality? A key to understanding the rationality behind a policy is to look for the policy theory. Within the framework adopted, it is suggested that the evaluator uses different methods to seek 'explanatory variables' and policy options that can affect the overall goal. Using positivist concepts within a postpositivist framework will probably sound the alarm being associated with some kind of refined positivism. However, this is an iterative and probing process, not entirely based on earlier studies and existing theory. The practical knowledge of what works on the ground in this case needs to be integrated as well (cf. Torgerson, 1995). 'Explanatory' variables are used for heuristic purposes in order to clarify the arguments and rationality elaborated within the policy discourse.

Table 2 summarizes the results of the probing process in this case. Initially, four variables were found to have potential affects on empowerment: knowledge, attitude to the public health and medical organization, juridical rights and organizational structure and resources. A key actor who entered the project when the programme was up-and-running, introduced a further 'explanatory variable', contending that treatments, including information, would also empower patients.

The policy theory was in this case built around the first two explanatory variables and the policy means linked to these variables. This is illustrated in italics in Table 2. As this example illustrates, the programme logic was not worked out in advance and in such cases a heuristic model can help the stakeholders to see the logic behind

*Table 2.*   Factors Potentially Affecting the Overall Goal of the Programme

| Explanatory variables | Policy means (options) | Dependent variable(s) |
|---|---|---|
| Knowledge | Information, education | Empower citizens |
| Attitude to the health and medical organizations | Motivation, persuasion | |
| Juridical rights | Develop citizens rights | |
| Organizational structure | Change routines or organization – structure | |
| Resources | More doctors, new priorities | |
| ? | ? | |

the adopted policy and identify other options. New policy options might be addressed and tried as part of an ongoing process. There is a need to permit 'new' variables and policy means to enter the analysis (indicated with ? in Table 2).

If a comprehensive policy theory, comprising all possible means to resolve the official as well as hidden objects, were to be revealed, such a theory would be both complicated and (partly) contradictory. Moreover, it would be of little use in understanding and explaining theory or implementation shortcomings (cf. Weiss, 1972). As in the realistic evaluation framework, the 'mechanism' or policy theory and the context need to be considered when assessing policy performance (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). However, the assessment of effectiveness must also include other considerations, such as the legitimacy of the policy and how it fits with the basic community values.

Another way to illuminate the rationality of policy is to identify prevailing lines of argument. In this project, two main lines of rational argument were identified, one working forward and the other backward. The difference between the two can be traced back to the perception of the policy problem. The forward line started with an investigation of the problem situation, followed by the identification of different policy options or solutions that could empower citizens. It resembles an ideal-type of rational policy making. Its proponents demanded an articulation and analysis of the problem. The policy problem was 'how to develop a medical information system that can empower citizens?'. Multimedia was not considered to be the only means or solution worth considering. In the implementation process, some key actors, as well as the evaluator, articulated this line of rationality, albeit in different ways.

In practice, it was a backward line of argument, starting with a pre-decided solution that was pre-eminent and guided the realization of the programme. The multimedia solution sought suitable problem definitions. According to this line, the policy problem was 'how to develop and institutionalize a multimedia

information system'. This is consistent with the observation that without solutions, there are no problems (Wildavsky, 1980: 83), or, rather, solutions determine how problems are framed and defined. From the very start the advocates of this line of argument had driven the project with a multimedia solution in mind. Promoters, policy makers and programme managers followed this rationality in slightly different ways. Any major deviation from the original multimedia concept was regarded as a failure. There was no need for a thorough problem description or analysis and when it did occur, it was strategically geared to a discussion on how to implement 'the solution' and to emphasize the possibilities of multimedia technology. Relevant problems to discuss were problems blocking the implementation process (cf. Sabatier, 1986). As a consequence of emerging implementation problems, a new goal that was to bring the public health and medical organizations together was articulated. This goal appeared to be logical in the backward line of rationality. Implementation problems were strategically reformulated as goals and presented as positive outcomes.

What can we learn about rationality in public policy from this case? Frequently, different stages are thought to sequentially follow after one another in rational policy making. The same holds true for rational policy analysis and evaluation. The underlying connotation behind concepts like 'policy cycle' (Hill, 1997a; Rist, 1995; Parsons, 1995), 'implementation' or 'lines of action' is that a policy should go through some logical steps, for example problem identification, mobilization of resources, implementation and evaluation. However, such patterns are rarely found in reality. As this evaluation confirms, different steps or policy components are frequently iterated in parallel or through backward-looking policy processes. Policy makers wish others, but not themselves, to be subjected to rationality and so called evidence-based practice. Indeed, the backward line of rationality guiding this project illustrates that technocratic policy makers are even prepared to mislead the public by operating with both an official and an unofficial agenda.

In development projects of this kind, the aim to empower citizens becomes an issue for experts and the political elite. Politicians and experts anticipate what is good for citizens, instead of inviting them to participate in the project. Implicitly, there is a gap between technocrat and citizen rationality. Citizens are generally more inclined to support evidenced-based practice, which in this case means sorting out information packages and multimedia applications which serve citizens' needs and contribute to empowerment.

## Implications for Evaluation Practice

In order to do justice to ongoing processes where many actors are involved, evaluators need to work with open frameworks and a combination of tools. One way to do this is briefly presented in this article, and of course there are many ways. However, if the framework adopted does not pay attention to different rationalities and changes taking place in ongoing processes, one can expect that demands for real-time evaluation will eventually decrease. Frameworks and methodologies must account for what is actually going on, and help practitioners to improve their practices and contribute to policy learning.

Secondly, if more than one policy problem is identified in an evaluation, the evaluator will have to make an important choice that will have implications for the subsequent evaluation. Evaluators are expected to evaluate official policy. However, if an unofficial policy problem or hidden agenda is uncovered, there will be at least three ways to proceed. The evaluator can gather the 'hidden agenda' information as process data and make use of it later, for example in a final report, to explain and interpret why a policy works the way it does. Another option could be to intervene in the process, sound the alarm and try to initiate a policy learning process. An intervention could include questioning whether goals and means are relevant to the problem situation. If the second alternative is tried, but eventually fails, the evaluator can either fall back on the first option, or try a third. A third option could be to renegotiate the evaluation task, in order to move the focus from the original intentions to include the hidden or changed goals. How evaluators deal with politics and rhetoric in policy evaluation has ethical as well as practical implications, for the individual evaluator as well as for the 'profession'. I would sympathize with evaluators who first go for the second line of action and who refuse to negotiate the contract if that mainly implies promoting technocratic policy making and avoiding critique.

Thirdly, if nobody else represents the citizen, the evaluator must. Policy makers wanted the policy to be associated with public consent and rationality, but in practice were conducting a Machiavellian policy. Their pre-occupation with realizing a preferred solution, using 'adequate' means, did not allow deliberation and policy learning. It implies that the precondition for creating policy learning within a technocratic policy-making culture is limited. Anticipating the needs of target populations is problematic in a situation where the distance between the elite and the people is growing. Experts in the field of IT, professionals or top politicians in the health and medical sector cannot be experts on citizens' needs and priorities. The evaluator taking on this responsibility can be justified with reference to the general purpose of the evaluation, provided it is in support of democracy. But there are different notions of democracy and the evaluator should be clear about what notion of democracy he or she is promoting (cf. Dryzek and Torgerson, 1993; House and Howe, 1999).

Finally, those responsible wanted an external evaluation to legitimize predetermined solutions. It implies that evaluators need to pay more attention to the rhetoric in public policy making, including strategic uses of evaluations. Policy evaluators generally assume that public policy is legitimate when asked to undertake a policy evaluation. The views, goals and solutions presented in official documents or expressed by mandated actors are then taken as points of departure. However, legitimacy is not automatically acquired by reference to democratic institutions or formal processes. Formal democratic institutions can be used to achieve formal legality, but it is not sufficient for achieving policy legitimacy. Moreover, legitimacy problems in modern states necessitate a reconsideration of the assumptions generally made in policy evaluation. The legitimacy of public policy cannot be taken as given and evaluators need to pay more attention to how a policy contributes to democracy and the (de)legitimatization of an established order.

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