**From:**

**“A PRIMER FOR POLICY ANALYSIS” by Edith Stokey and Richard Zeckhauser, Norton 1978** pp 5-7

*I have added some to the original. These are in blue italics. A template for presenting results is at the end.*

*I have also done some editing over the years but not marked where I have done so.*

**A Framework for Analysis**

A complicated policy issue lands on your desk. As a policy analyst in a New York State agency; you are directed to investigate and evaluate alternative pollution control measures for the Hudson River. The problem has many aspects. Where to begin, how to proceed, how to sort them out? You can always muddle along, hoping eventually to develop a feel for the situation, but such a hit-or-miss approach rarely works consistently, if at all. We prefer a standard procedure that will at least help you make a start on digging into a complex policy issue. This is one such procedure.

Many policy analysts have experimented with a variety of ways to structure complex problems like this one. We suggest the following five part framework as a starting point. As you gain experience in thinking analytically about policy choices, you will perhaps wish to revise it to suit your own operational style.

1. **Establishing the Context.** What is the underlying problem that must be dealt with? *What is the problem?* *Why is it a problem?* *Are you sure you are addressing the problem and not a symptom of a problem?* What specific objectives are to be pursued in confronting this problem?

2. **Laying Out the Alternatives.** What are the alternative courses of action? What are the possibilities for gathering further information?

3. **Predicting the Consequences.** What are the consequences of each of the alternative actions? What techniques are relevant for predicting these consequences? If outcomes are uncertain, what is the estimated likelihood of each?

4. **Valuing the Outcomes.** By what criteria should we measure success in pursuing each objective? Recognizing that inevitably some alternatives will be superior with respect to certain objec­tives and inferior with respect to others, how should different combinations of valued objectives be compared with one another?

5. **Making a Choice.** Drawing all aspects of the analysis together, what is the preferred course of action? *What is your solution? And based on 2-4, why is it a solution.*

None of this means to imply that an analyst will always proceed in an orderly fashion from one stage of the analysis to the next. Real people, even the most experienced, rarely operate so neatly, nor should they try to. But each of these five critical areas must be dealt with. A policy analysis usually turns to be an iterative process, with the analyst working back and forth among the tasks of identifying problems, defining objectives, enumerating possible alternatives, predicting outcomes, establishing criteria, and valuing tradeoffs, to refine the analysis. This is an entirely sensible approach. That said, it is easier to keep track of where you are in this iterative process, and to avoid going around in circles (a disease with which even the best analysts are occasionally afflicted), if you keep in mind a basic framework to which every aspect of the analysis must be related. Furthermore, the consumers of your analysis will thank you, for strict adherence to a clearly visible structure makes for far easier reading and comprehension, and opens up the analysis for evaluation and debate.

To be sure, not all the questions we bring together here will be addressed in every piece of policy analysis. The analyst will frequently be asked merely to predict outcomes, or will enter the decision process at an intermediate stage, after the range of possible actions has already been delineated. He may be asked to set forth the nature of the tradeoffs that must be made among objectives without making a final choice. This is particularly likely to be the case when a decision revolves around what are sometimes labeled "fragile values," such as risks to health or to the ecosystem. Perhaps the decision maker will be pressed for time, so that waiting for further information (an option that is frequently understressed) is out of the question. And often an analyst will be asked to "suboptimize," to find a best choice for a lower level problem without worrying about the overall problem. Almost all budget decisions are made in this way; the local library trustees are expected to make their expenditure decisions within a given total sum without reference to how the highway department will be spending its funds.

**Some Practical Advice**

Many of the policy decisions you will encounter will not fit neatly and automatically into the models presented here, for the real world is rich and complex. Policy analysis is not an assembly line process, where a single purpose tool can be applied repeatedly to whatever problem comes along. These are a craftsman's tools; you must learn to wield them with skill. Reading about policy analysis is only a beginning. An academic mastery of the tools will hardly prove sufficient; judgment and sophistication in applying them should be your ultimate goal. Therefore our perennial advice to students is "Practice!" Practice on all kinds of situations, large and small, public and private. Look regularly at the front page of the newspaper and think hard about one of the policy problems featured. Perhaps a proposed plan for energy conservation is under discussion; see if you can define the immediate objectives of the plan and their relationship to the underlying problem. What procedures would you use to predict the practical outcome of the plan? How would you treat uncertainty? What further information would you want? Should the plan be implemented sequentially? By what criteria would you evaluate the success of a proposed policy? On what basis should the decision be made?

Practice thinking informally in terms of objectives in your day-to-day work. When you are taking part in a budgeting process, say for a committee or a voluntary organization, consider what the organization's objectives might be and what various expenditures would accomplish. For example, suppose you are serving on a committee to allocate limited student aid funds. What are the committee's objectives? How should they be traded off against one another? How do various types and amounts of aid satisfy these objectives?

Practice on your own problems and decisions, using models to get your thinking straight or to illuminate commonplace events. For example, when you find yourself waiting in line, ask yourself what could be accomplished with additional service capacity, and what the benefits of such a move would be. When the local school committee advocates an inexpensive building with high maintenance costs, think about the tradeoff between present and future spending that is implied.

Above all, practice presenting your conclusions systematically; you don't need to become a gifted and sophisticated analyst before you can upgrade your output. Make up your mind that at least once every day you will deliberately apply the outline set forth above to a problem you face. You'll be amazed at what it will do for your reputation for perceptiveness and good judgment.

***A Template for Presenting your results:***

*You will need to address each question below, more or less in the order presented.*

1. *What is the problem addressed*
2. *Why is it a problem*
3. *What is the proposed solution*
4. *Why is it a solution*
5. *Briefly what alternatives were considered*
6. *Why were they not solutions*
7. *What is the implementation*
8. *What was the impact in terms of the goals set*