

# Building on Health Policy Analysis Triangle: Elucidation of the Elements

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## ABSTRACT

Health policy triangle first presented in the 20th century by Walt and Gilson, has been extensively used at local, national, regional, and international levels to assess health policies related to communicable and non-communicable diseases, physical and mental health, antenatal and postnatal care and human resources, services and systems. However, the framework lacks the intricate details to be considered and assessed for each of the four pillars in the triangle viz: 'content', 'context', 'actors' and 'processes'. We propose a checklist of elements to be considered for each pillar; to ease and enhance the process of policy analyses for researchers and policy makers across the globe, including low- and middle-income countries. We suggest using the Leichter's categorization: situational, structural, cultural, and environmental factors for comprehensive contextual assessment. Kingdon's multiple streams framework can be applied to determine the 'window of opportunity' allowing the politics, policy, and problem streams to unite, giving birth to the formulation of policies. Lastly, stakeholder analyses expounding the power, influence, interest, and involvement of intrinsic, extrinsic, implicit and explicit players should be applied to explore the 'actors' in policy analyses. Robust policy analyses for generating evidence is of paramount importance for policy makers for informed decision making. Our approach of dis-entangling and elaborating the pillars of the triangle, will be helpful for health systems' researchers to generate relevant information to serve as basis of evidence based informed decision making.

### Highlights

Our approach of dis-entangling and elaborating pillars of the health policy triangle is helpful for health systems' researchers to generate relevant information as basis of evidence based and informed decision-making.

- Leichter's categorization is helpful for comprehensive contextual assessment of situational, structural, cultural, and environmental factors affecting policy formulation
- Kingdon's multiple streams framework can be applied to determine the 'window of opportunity' allowing the politics, policy, and problem streams to unite, giving birth to formulation of policies.
- Stakeholder analyses expounding the power, influence, interest, and involvement of intrinsic, extrinsic, implicit, and explicit players should be applied to explore the 'actors' in policy analyses.

## Introduction

### Policy

A policy is a purposive set of actions followed by an actor (usually government) in dealing with a problem or a matter of concern [1]. A health policy is an agreement or consensus on the health issues, goals and objectives to be addressed, the priorities among those objectives and the main directions for achieving them [2]. Policy expression can take theoretical and empirical forms.

### Policy Analysis

Regulations and legislation; guidelines, standards, and targets form formal manifestation of policies, which set out national and/or sub-national priorities, basis for international agreements, and provide a frame for resource allocation and a benchmark for gauging accountability. Policies can be exhibited more subtly through general statements about organizational or national priorities, the funded programs of a country, unwritten but widely accepted practices and traditions.

#### Box 1: Leichter's categorization of contextual factors in policy analysis

**Situational factors**- idiosyncratic, transient conditions, e.g., disasters, covid-19, change of government etc.

**Structural factors**: permanent characteristics of health systems or policy apparatus, e.g., devolution, health-care delivery system etc.

**Cultural factors**: societal, organizational, and individual beliefs and values e.g., resistance to mask wearing in the United States amidst Covid-19.

**Environmental factors**: external/ international values, events, agreements, and structures e.g., across border travel restrictions during Covid-19.

Figure 1: The Policy Analysis Triangle, adapted from Walt and Gilson 1994 [8].

Policy analysis refers to a wide range of techniques used to holistically scrutinize the features of established policies, their evolution, and consequences considering given goals and targets. It is a multi-disciplinary inquiry that explains the reasons of success or failure of policies and provides a roadmap for further planning. It helps the decision makers to plan ahead by making informed choices about the context and involvement of implicit and explicit actors in the process of policy instigation. The chaotic response to Covid-19 has underscored the inadequate preparedness of health systems and emphasized that countries should systematically evaluate and disseminate evidence about what works and what does not, to implement new and scale up previously proven innovations to improve the health and survival probability of people. Policy analysis is a pragmatic tool to establish clear linkages between the functions and outcomes of the health systems, to improve the quality of decisions and guide development of evidence based,

realistic and achievable health plans and strategies, including responding and recovering from the pandemic.

Numerous frameworks and approaches to policy analyses have been coined in the past several decades [3-7]. We elaborate the technique by building on the health policy triangle (HPT) first presented by Walt and Gilson in 1994 and used immensely thereafter [8]. According to a recent systematic review, the HPT has been ubiquitous in the health policy literature to analyze a large number of health-related policy concerns, especially in the low- and middle-income countries [9]. Its universal nature allows it to be applied to national, regional and global levels. However, many researchers complement the HPT with additional frameworks and tools to refine and elaborate their analyses. There is a consensus that there is dearth of conceptual and theoretical approaches and frameworks to comprehensively assess the processes of HPT. [10]. We intend to fill that literature gap by elaborating the elements that

need to be assessed for each pillar of HPT. Figure 1 demonstrates the HPT, according to which the policy analyses hang on four crucial pillars of assessing the

- a) Content
- b) Context in Which the Policies Originate
- c) The Processes
- d) Actors negatively or positively involved in formulation and implementation of policies.

We shall discuss each component in detail.

**Context:** Context refers to the complex eco-system that influences policy dialogue and decisions. Context matters as it

influences the degree to which policy community agrees on the definition of, causes of and solutions to, the problem as well as public portrayals of the issue in ways that resonate with external actors, especially the political leaders who control resources [11]. Leichter’s categorization of contextual factors assesses the situational, structural, cultural and environmental factors that affect the policy processes (Box 1) [12]. Nonetheless, the list is not exhaustive and may include other relevant factors such as economic and political elements, depending upon the problem under consideration. These factors build up political moments when conditions align favorably for an issue, presenting opportunities for advocates to influence decision makers. Moreover, they reflect the degree to which norms and institutions operating in a sector provide a platform for effective collective action.

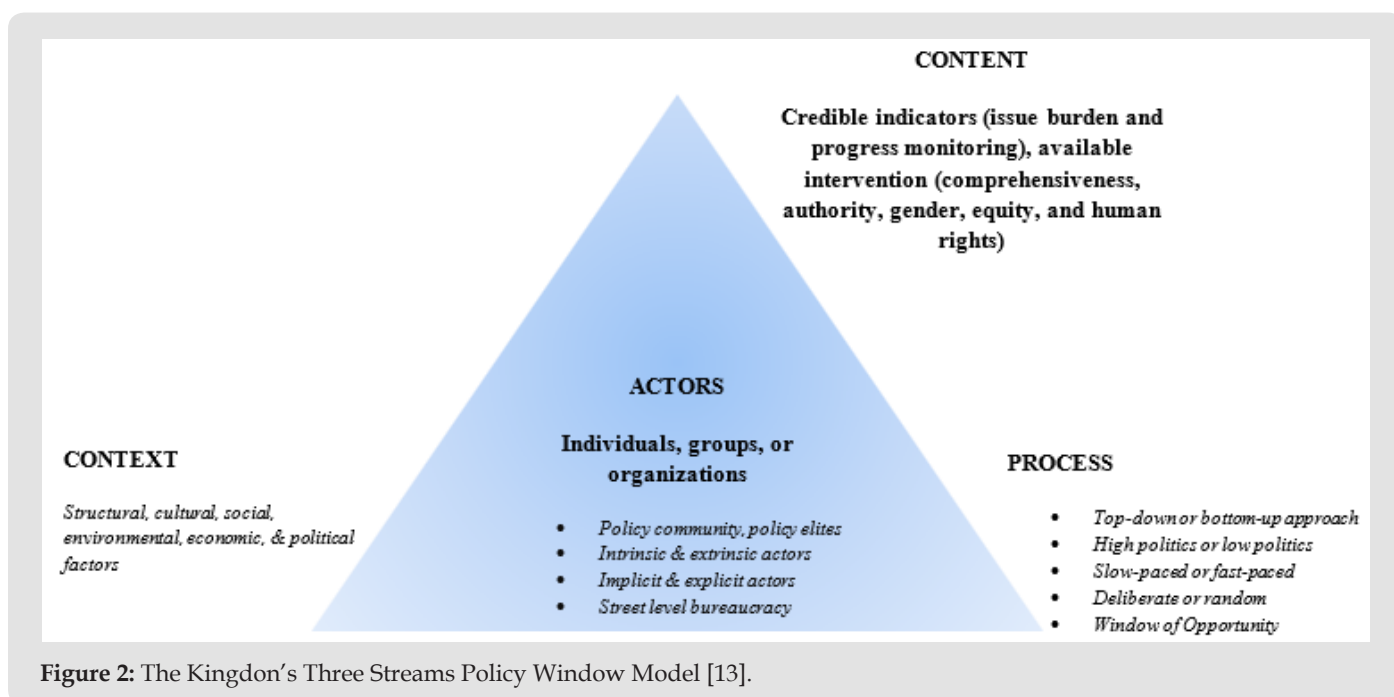


Figure 2: The Kingdon’s Three Streams Policy Window Model [13].

**Process:** Process refers to the way a policy is instigated; it could follow a top-down or bottom-up approach, be slow-paced or fast-paced, deliberate or random, smooth or messy. Policy processes could be ‘high politics’ requiring fundamental changes in the role of the state [e.g., travel restrictions amidst Covid-19], or ‘low politics’ that do not question the status quo [8]. Kingdon’s Multiple Streams Framework delineates that the policy process is embedded in the problem, policy and politics stream (Figure 2). The three streams conventionally run independently; the window of opportunity opens when all three come together and the policy emerges [13]. Many other models for assessing the policy processes exist: the rational approach [14], considers policy making a linear process and

is rarely witnessed in the real world; the incrementalist approach [15] reflects the process as bargaining, negotiation and adjustment between the stakeholders, mixed scanning [16] includes taking a bird’s eye view of the policy arena and randomly picking up operational areas, diffusion of innovations theory [17] relates to transfer of international agendas into national agendas, and path dependency model [18] exhibits replication of past policy agendas into future directions. The policy process often follows a muddling through non-linear, irrational route, influenced by myriad push and pull factors. The policy analysts need to consider all aspects of the policy process to develop a comprehensive understanding of the course of policy emergence.

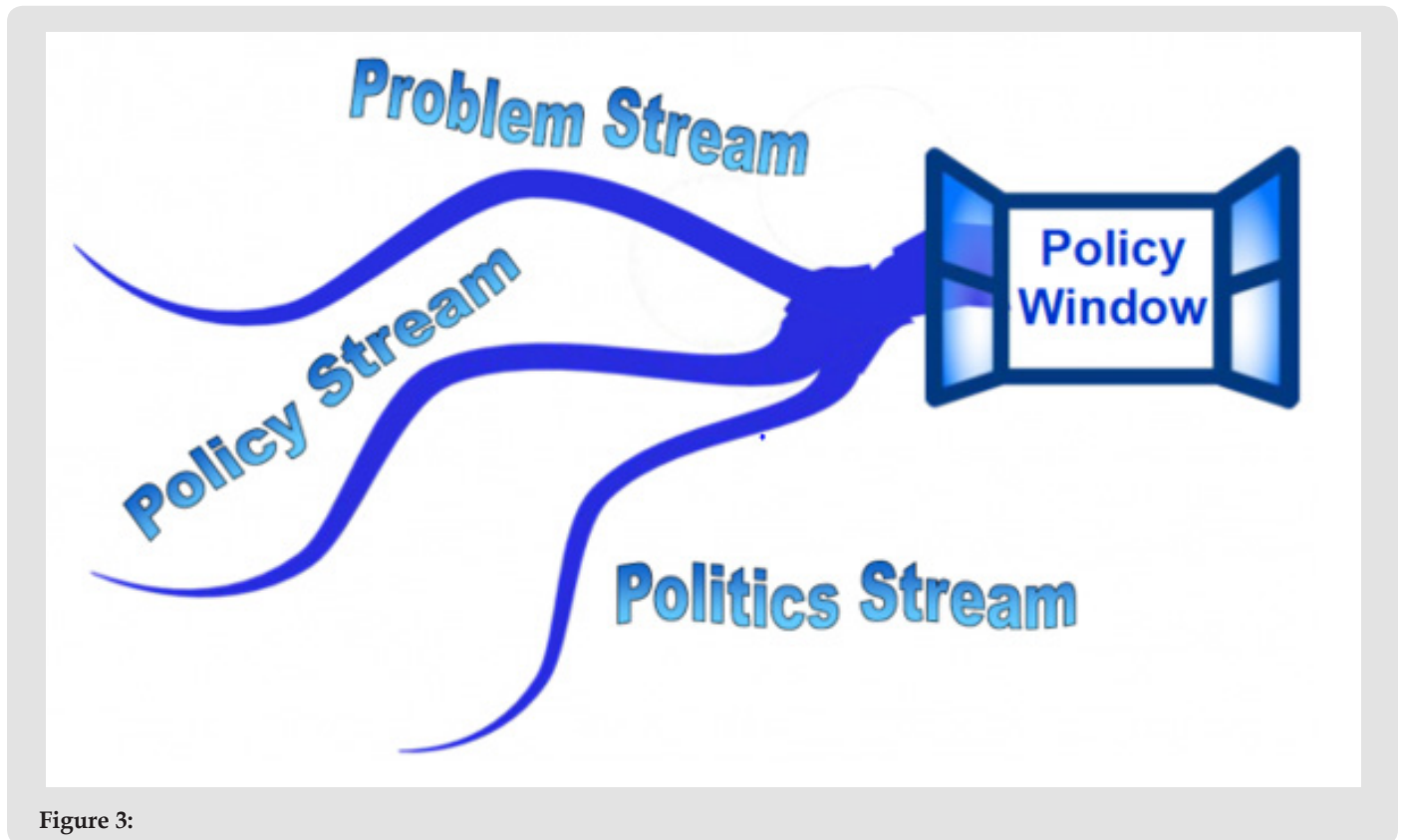


Figure 3:

**Actors:** The actors could be individuals, groups or organizations involved in the policy reform process. These include intrinsic and extrinsic, explicit, and implicit players; sub-national, national, or international agencies, multi-lateral, bi-lateral and non-governmental organizations forming policy elites, communities, and issue networks. Simultaneously, the power and influence of street level bureaucracy should not be overlooked in policy analyses. Policy analysts should thoroughly analyze and appreciate the position, power, interests and characteristics of the involved stakeholders and alliances to understand the policy landscape (stakeholder analyses). Strength of actors and organizations concerned with the issue could form an important and interesting arena for policy analysis to identify if those who are going to be affected with the policy have any role to play in policy formulation. When issues are not controversial framing of actors could still be an issue (Shiffman & Smith framework). Actors also need to be analyzed in context of presence or absence of guiding institutions which have any mandate to lead the concerned initiative. Apart from this degree of agreement and cohesion or disagreeing and distrust among various actors is also important to be analyzed while assessing policy formulation process.

Policy content analysis is the process of describing policies quantitatively (in terms of numbers) and qualitatively. Quantitative content analysis should ideally be based on issue characteristics

explained through credible indicators expressing the severity of the problem on one hand and progress monitoring on the other, as well as reflecting the problem burden relative to other existing conditions. It should also entail effective interventions meant to address the problem, in most cost effective and scientifically proven manner. Policy content review may include policy cube approach for qualitative analysis in HPT discussing comprehensiveness of global best buys on included interventions, and other axes including human rights, gender and equity along with depth of authority for implementation [19]. Policy analyses is an arduous task. Explicit blueprints may not be available to determine the terrain of policies. It is important to scrupulously analyze all the processes, contextual factors and involved actors along with the content of policies for comprehensive understanding of policy reforms. The elements of each pillar (content, context, processes, actors) as detailed in Figure 1 and Box 1 need to be kept in mind before commencing policy analyses. Nonetheless, the list is not exhaustive and amenable to change according to the context and nature of the health concern. The stakeholders ought to utilize policy analyses as a decision-making tool to avoid past errors, make cautious selection and adopt best measures for future implementation.

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NA.

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## Critical Revision of the Article

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