

# Strengths and weaknesses of policy cycles politics essay



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The term of policy seems to have broader meaning than what government should do or not to do. Bridgman and Davis (2000, as cited by Colebatch, 2009: 47) define policy as “ a course of action by government designed to achieve certain results”. These series of action is started with thought, moving to actions, and ended with solution. In ideal world, policies are made by government, as representatives of public, to eliminate some of social problems. In reality, the policy process is more complex and in certain circumstance it fails to meet the stated goals. Problems throughout policy process mean that policy phase or policy cycle is not necessarily effective in achieving its objectives. However, separately from the weaknesses, policy cycle is a useful tool to guide policy maker in policy-making. This essay will describes the strengths of policy cycle as a tool in making a policy through a good process, and its weaknesses when facing a reality in the complex world.

## **The Strengths**

The strength of policy cycle in policy process lies on its stages. Each stage in the policy cycle enables decision makers to identify problems, identify and evaluate alternative policies, and selecting the most appropriate strategy. Moreover, Althaus et al. (2007) suggest that policy cycle provide policy maker with an understanding about what they should do since every stage in policy cycle is clear and identifiable steps. As an illustration, in agenda setting stage, policy maker normally set the agenda by checking problems which have emerged and gained a lot of public attention and require government intervention. In this stage policy maker should know what and why there are prevailing problems surrounding certain issues. They also

need to analyze social and political context and check whether current policy is effective for being applied to certain issue as well as get the general idea that will be involved in this policy. When a set of policy alternatives have been analyzed, the next stage is a decision making which is then followed by implementation. Policy cycle does not stop at policy implementation stage, but continued with evaluation in which the results decision that have been taken are monitored by all parties, both inside government and other groups outside government.

Each of these stages can be seen separately and it makes possible for the policy maker to identify, revisit, and reanalyze which phase has been conducted in a wrong way. In addition, stages in policy cycle can be compared separately (Davis et al 1993). For instance, the evaluation stage allows the policy maker to make a comparison between the stated goal and result that have been achieved.

The next strength of policy cycle is it is a tool to get more rational decision. The policy process often involves the interaction of many parties, ranging from government itself, researchers, media to politicians (Sabatier 2003). Each of these actors and institutions have different views on an issue and policy cycle accommodate all inputs from these parties and then analyzed more deeply to get the best strategy (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). For example, in the making of energy saving policy which is one of the sensitive sectors policy maker should have a coordination with many stakeholders outside government, such as trade and industry as the parties that concerned with the utilization of energy in production activities, the private sector which have interest with this issue since it relates with the reduction

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of working hours, and consumer protection as a representative body of the consumer voice. All options and alternative decisions given by all stakeholders are accommodated for deep analysis before deciding the final choice. The process involves a variety of interests is seen as the strengths of the policy cycle because the decisions are more rational.

Good decisions are not solely generated from the implementation of all stages in the policy cycle however policy-making without all stages has less chance of success. As argued by Michael Keating (1996, as cited by Sabatier, 2003) good process does not always bring good policy however bad process leads to bad outcome. Policy cycle is not a series of stages that are fixed from one stage to the next. To get the best possible decision, each stage in the policy cycle could be returned to the previous stage if it is found some mistakes or insufficiency data for decision making. In many cases, the cabinet might ask policy maker to revisit the process of identification and decision analysis because of lack of information received. In addition, the policy cycle stages can be performed repeatedly to get a good policy. For example, it is possible that policy instrument stage to be repeatedly found that if taken the wrong alternative.

## **The Weaknesses**

Like other approach, the policy cycle has weaknesses. Firstly, it is difficult to generate a decision when external factors, such as politics has entered into the arena (Edward, 2001, as cited in Everett, 2003). In a democratic system, policy is taken not only by the one-governance but it will involve a lot of participant or political parties, as suggested by Davis et al. (1993, as cited in Everett, 2003) that most policies resulting from negotiations between  
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interests. These political leader are not completely independent, they bring the party goals that often does not meet with the government goals. Leaders of the party could demonstrate their interests in almost every step of the policy-making process, either in the early stages such as agenda setting and decision-making which is sometimes led to take longer time to make a decision than what is expected. Not only in the agenda setting stage, these political leaders are also using the implementation process as one opportunity to bring back the party's interests which are not accommodated in the early stages if they proposed alternative decision is not selected by the government (Howlett and Ramesh 2003).

Furthermore Everett (2003) argue that even consultation, which is considered as the most important stage in policy cycle, cannot address controversy among political interest and sometimes fail to finish the policy process with concrete decision. She gives her case study on coal transport infrastructure location as an example of political influence in the content of policy.

Secondly, it is un-doubtful that policy cycle is a tool to simplify policy process however this becomes less effective when the reality is more complex and challenging, as suggested by Everett (2003) that policy cycle is normative and impractical in decision making. This view is based on argument that policy process involves many hands from various level of government, and many of them are not addressing the same problem, or even have different ideas about what would be a good answer. All these different ideas and different interests are accommodated in the policy cycle, and sometimes they can slow decision making process or even change the decision.

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Moreover, good policy is not only determined by a series of stage but also quality of policy makers itself to analyze problems and choose the best strategy, pressures from interest groups, and political situations (Sabatier and Jenkins Smith 1993). It is therefore need more ability to understand activities and interaction of these different parties than a set of stages.

Finally, other thing that should be considered in policy process is urgency of policy. In certain circumstance, government should take a decision in a short time without passing all stages in policy cycle. For example, to anticipate the impact of the global financial crisis in Indonesia, the government issued fiscal stimulus policy to support the real sector activities. This policy was made without doing the stages in the policy cycle such as coordination with local governments as one of the recipients of this aid. In addition, the scope of policy also becomes one of consideration that policy cycle is not necessarily applied in policy process. In certain circumstance, some of the issues that emerged were simple problems, it is therefore direct action is more appropriate rather than follow stages in policy cycle, but the same treatment cannot be applied for the problems that have a broader impact. In other words, policy cycle is not necessarily be used in every circumstance.

## **Conclusion**

It is un-doubtful that the policy cycle is a tool to improve policy through effective series of stage. The stages in the policy cycle can provide a systematic framework to policy maker that helps them in the policy process.

It also make possible for the policy maker to view each stage separately to determine the best strategy. However, it is arguable that the policy cycle can

be applied in complex situations where a lot of interests enter to the arena  
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and influence the policy process, such as politics. The other thing need to be point out is that urgency and scope of policy also become the other consideration whether policy cycle effectively explain the policy process.

Despite the policy cycle has its weaknesses, every stage in policy cycle is useful tools in policy process but it does not necessarily meet the real process in decision-making.