Public Policy Decision-Making: How decisions *should* be made versus how they *are* made in practice

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Public policy making tends to be a messy process, in which circumstances, events, political dynamics, elected and unelected officials, as well as the public mood all shape policy decisions. Do we celebrate this messiness as a glorious part of the democratic process or do we attempt to impose at least some order or technical criteria on the often rather ad-hoc or chaotic process of political decision-making? The mere term messiness suggests that there is scope for improvement or correction, particularly when long-term solutions to complex economic or social problems are called for. We may be able to afford "messiness" for low impact decisions, but to solve problems of gang or drug violence, reduce poverty, address inequality, enhance the quality of our countries' education systems, improve the delivery of other public services or to lead the way in digitalizing our economies, requires a much more rational approach to policy making than we often observe in practice in order to avoid costly mistakes and achieve the desired results.

Such a rational approach includes carefully defining the initial problem (and deciding who to involve in the problem definition), assembling critical evidence and data (which - thanks so technology - is a lot more easily accessible than before), constructing a number of different policy alternatives, selecting decision criteria, projecting the expected results, confronting trade-offs and finally taking the decision and communicating it to the team, organization or the public (see, Bardach's (2012) famous 8th fold path). Luckily, we have many helpful tools available to evaluate policy approaches, their feasibility and potential outcomes - all of which attempt to impose some order on the madness that can surround policy making:

- A PESTEL analysis is a systematic comparison of the political, economic, social, technological, environmental and legal pros and cons or drivers and barriers of a policy or different policy alternatives. It allows us to develop a deeper understanding of our macro decision environment and identify factors we may not be able to influence or control directly. Perhaps a PESTEL analysis will help us uncover why it is so difficult to innovate in Brazil or how to go about enhancing innovation investment in the country and foster greater cooperation between the public, academic and business sectors.

- A stakeholder analysis forces us to map important interests, motivations, analyze the intensity of actors' preferences, their power and legitimacy better to understand conflicting perspectives and eventually to develop more effective strategies to deal with them. Perhaps the recent violent

strikes in Paris could have been avoided if the government had conducted a more careful stakeholder analysis before raising gas taxes.

- Decision-Tree analysis allows us to project possible policy outcomes, depict their sequence, and assess their likelihood of occurrence. Perhaps Latin American countries' debt reduction strategies would be more effective, if they applied tools to project the efficacy of proposed policies alternatives more systematically.

Yet, even if we rely on more rational tools to generate or analyze different policy options, we are still often blinded by our biases. We may, for example, only look at sub-sets of data which confirm our preconceived notions of which policy is the best way to go or we may ignore data which suggests there are better alternatives. We may also reject a policy simply because it was proposed by our political opponents even though rationally it is desirable and likely to address the social problem we are seeking to solve. A prominent example is the rejection by US Republican Senator Mitch McConnel of criminal justice reform under the Obama administration seeking to reduce the problem of overcrowded prisons followed by his u-turn on, and support of, a very similar policy proposal under President Trump.

So, what strategies help us generate the most desirable outcomes for our constituencies and the broader public? We need decision processes that help us overcome potential biases and which invite policy makers, their staff and civil servants to "speak truth to power", challenge pre-existing notions or assumptions, and foster critical examination of different options. For these to succeed in our discussion and political negotiations we need to:

- maintain a focus on factual information rather than engaging in attempts to personally discredit our political opponents;

- seek more than two perspectives on any policy issues;

- focus on common group and organizational goals to reduce political conflict;

- strive to develop and maintain a balanced power structure while avoiding hierarchy getting into the way of a more rational, evidence-based decision-making; and

- engage with stakeholders to gain a deeper understanding of competing perspectives.

While politics and organizational decision-making will always be messy in the real world, it is up to us – in our own spheres of influence – to work through this mess, avoid common mistakes, and generate accountable and participatory policy decision-making processes that enhance the credibility of our democracies and generate quality outcomes for our citizens. This means that we need to ensure that the initial set of policy alternatives that is subsequently submitted to the rough and tumble of politics has been generated through a systematic and analytical process relying on data and evidence. While this is easier said than done, we are certainly much more likely to succeed if we do!