Chapter 1
Policy Practice

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How should the social work profession proceed in the political arena? Is there a way for individual social workers to engage in policy practice without condemning those with whom we might disagree? How might the profession counter the trend of social workers not running for political office?

Introduction

Policy practice is an interesting practice construct, certainly different from the more traditional micro-macro practice spheres. In this chapter policy practice is viewed as an important practice area and one that fits nicely with the social work profession. In an ideal world policies would solve the problems they were intended to address...social workers are, by the nature of their profession and position, inherently involved in social policy. Yet social workers, for the most part, tend to stay away from the policy arena. For example, in the current 112th Congress, there is a total of 435 members of the House of Representatives. These individuals report a variety of professions: 170 are lawyers, 78 are educators, 175 are in business, 15 are physicians, 5 are ordained ministers, and 4 are peace corps volunteers, plus there are 7 accountants, 6 engineers, 15 farmers, 9 ranchers, and 7 social workers (Manning, 2011). According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), in 2008, the last year NASW collected such data, approximately 165 individuals held elected offices at the local or state levels of government across the United States. What we can conclude is that social workers simply are not holding elective offices.

Yes, social workers are employed in key staff positions in elected officials’ offices; for example, the long-term legislative director for U.S. Congressperson Luis Gutierrez (D-IL) is a social worker. Even so, social workers holding staff positions in federal, state, or local offices are not prominent. Social workers also are not commonplace in governmental relations offices, for example, lobbying firms.
What makes this confusing is that social workers, as evidenced by discussions at various state and national meetings as well as on LISTSERVs, seem to be engaged in constant “political” discussions. But for whatever reason, the discussions do not lead to the risks involved in pursuing a political career or direct engagement in political processes.

Without a doubt, social workers bring a unique, human perspective to policy discussions. Day in and day out, social workers work with people, groups, and communities around a variety of human issues in a way that is unique from other disciplines. The “practice wisdom” gleaned from such work allows social workers to put a human face on policy initiatives. We have seen the results of policies developed by and enacted by lawyers, farmers, and businesspeople. Little has changed as social issues remain fully embedded in our national human fabric. One can only wonder what would happen if there were 170 social workers in the U.S. House of Representatives rather than lawyers.

There are a variety of ways for social workers to engage in policy practice in ways other than holding an elective office. We all must understand—policy practice is not easy; it is slow, tedious, and certainly frustrating. Yet, to turn our professional collective backs on the political nature of our work is ignoring that which we know.

We also need to recognize that the social work political tent is big—social workers reflect a variety of political parties and philosophies including Democrat, Republican, Tea Party, Libertarian, Green, liberal, conservative, and radical. For every social issue you identify, social workers hold a variety of positions, often in conflict with each other. In other words, the social work profession does not nor should reflect one political ideology.

There is nothing wrong if a social worker subscribes to one particular ideology; the issue is when this same person, who believes in self-determination and individualism, penalizes others, be they students or colleagues, because they may hold a different political philosophy or argue from a different perspective. Personal ideological insecurity simply will not realize a just society.

Policy Practice

Benjamin is a BSSW-level social worker who is employed as a case manager in a mental health treatment facility. He loves his work and has an excellent record of effective practice with his clients. He is concerned, however, with one aspect of his agency’s operation. He has noticed that many clients have recently discontinued their treatment despite substantial improvement in their reported issues. Curious as to why this might be occurring, Benjamin made a few phone calls to clients who had recently dropped out of treatment. He was astounded to discover that four of the five people he called had stopped attending sessions because their state-provided supplemental income benefits had been cut. These former clients reported
a simple choice: They could either not pay their rent or stop attending treatment sessions. They had taken care of immediate necessities rather than their important, but less urgent, mental health needs.

Benjamin is disturbed that so many were leaving treatment, but he is even more disturbed that it was unnecessary that most of them do so. His agency had funding alternatives that would have allowed all the persons he called to remain in treatment. They had not taken advantage of those alternatives simply because they had not been aware of them. The agency had no means of assuring that the information was made available to them. Having discovered this problem, Benjamin resolves to find a way to solve it. Further, he wishes to institutionalize the solution, so that it is certain to remain in place into the foreseeable future.

Alma is the executive director of the same agency at which Benjamin is a case manager. She is unaware that her agency’s clients are withdrawing from services because of the income cutbacks. She is aware, however, that the cutbacks are occurring. Alma is a part of a local coalition of social service providers that is concerned about the conditions area residents have begun to face as a result of the cuts. A community needs assessment conducted after the changes revealed that the number of persons becoming homeless had increased, the rate of the referral of children into the child welfare system had nearly doubled, and community health experts were predicting a surge in emergency room treatment and hospitalizations. Further investigation showed that all these conditions could be traced, at least in part, to the loss of income many families had experienced. Several other effects have been reported in the community including increased demand at food banks and a rising crime rate. No formal research has been conducted that could identify a link between these conditions and the cuts. There is, however, strong evidence from reports of residents that such a link exists. Further evidence is provided by the fact that these changes occurred in the wake of the cuts and have a logical relationship to them.

The coalition of agencies has been formed to study and to address the problem. Its mission is to develop and implement a plan to get the cuts reversed, and to assure a steady supply of supplemental income to the residents of its community and state. So far the coalition has met twice, collected available data about the cuts and their effects, and drafted a mission statement to guide future activities. The statement is short, simple, and to the point: “The mission of the Supplemental Income Reinstatement Coalition is to restore the level of each program recipient’s supplemental income to pre-cut levels.”

Both Benjamin and Alma face issues created by current social welfare policy. The problems have a common cause, the supplemental income cuts, but the manifestations of the issue and the levels at which they hope to address the issue are very different. Benjamin faces a problem at the agency level. It is a policy issue, more specifically, one caused by the absence of any effective policy to assure that an undesirable condition does not arise. He will probably find it relatively easy to identify a solution, gain access to decision makers, and persuade those decision makers to take steps to
address the problem. Alma, on the other hand, faces a problem generated at a higher level, and that affects many people in a variety of ways. Although ultimately the cause of the problems they want to address is the same, the scope and goals of their efforts will differ in significant ways.

Benjamin and Alma have chosen to engage in an important social work activity: policy practice. Janssen (1999) defined policy practice as “efforts to change policies in legislative, agency, and community settings, whether by establishing new policies, improving existing ones, or defeating the policy initiatives of other people.” Many social workers express little interest in policy, but their careers are intrinsically involved with social welfare policy. In fact, policy furnishes their careers. Problems are recognized by policy makers, policies written, social programs developed, and jobs created. Many are filled by social workers.

In an ideal world policies would solve the problems they were intended to address. In reality this is sometimes not the case. Take, for example, Benjamin’s discovery. Policies related to mental health treatment are working well. Policies to provide alternative funding for services also exist. There is, however, a problem in agency policy. No policy has been written to assure that clients are aware of the financial supports. In this case, policies such as those providing for mental health treatment fail because of the absence of other supportive policy.

Alma’s group is hoping to address policy failure at a higher and broader level. The group has only recently begun to study the issue, but it appears that this body of policy worked well at one point. Changes in the social climate or political landscape have reduced its effectiveness.

The absence of policy and changes in the social or political situation are two of the many conditions that can cause or contribute to policy failure. Among the many others are poorly conceived policies, policies that fail to consider unintended consequences, policies that fail to consider the potential for disruption at other levels, and policies that are well-conceived but are not ultimately fundable (Ellis, 2003; Janssen, 1999). Furthermore, some older social problems, such as poverty, have never been adequately addressed on a national scale, much less globally. Despite the ongoing problems faced by U.S. citizens, those problems often pale when compared to those of persons in other countries. New social problems also arise, prompted by events both national and international. The tragic events of 9/11 point to a clear need for new and innovative policies not only to prevent future terrorist tragedies, but also to provide support and assistance to their victims should the preventive policies fail. Issues related to migration and immigration, refugeeism, and human rights also cry out for solutions crafted by the hands of social workers. The new responses must be “out-of-the-box” in that they must look at problems globally rather than regionally or nationally. In the modern world little happens in a national vacuum. Events in other countries and processes that cross international borders cause and exacerbate conditions within our own country. These increased pressures underscore the need for innovative solutions such as international exchange
of ideas, information, and problem-solving experts. Technological developments offer methods of communication, information transfer, and exchange of ideas that might otherwise be prohibitively costly or simply impossible. Social workers are among those at the table in some of the groups planning policy-directed interventions for these international issues. More social workers and more groups are needed as global change accelerates.

It is clear from this introductory discussion that social workers are, by the nature of their profession and position, inherently involved in social policy. In addition, they may engage in policy practice at many levels, from working to add a few lines to a “Policy and Procedures Manual” to altering the laws that guide how nations interact. It is also important to recognize the unique contribution that social workers often make to policy planning. First, social workers are often in a position to be among the first to recognize social problems. Those whose lives are directly affected by the problems are typically the first to recognize their presence. However, because of the direct communication with client groups social workers such as Benjamin have with persons in the community, these direct service workers may often become aware of problems before any other group. A second reason a social work presence is important to the planning process is that it provides the opportunity to influence problem definition. Problem definition refers to the way in which policy makers interpret and explain a problem. Interpretation and explanation, in turn, influence the way a solution is formed. Consider, for example, problems experienced by persons in poverty. If, as many conservatives believe, it is possible for the impoverished to simply “pull themselves up by their boot straps,” policies should be written that provide for the most cursory of interventions. The vast majority of the responsibility for change would lie with poor people and their allegorical boot straps. Social workers recognize that although a portion of the responsibility for change lies in the individual, impoverished persons face a daunting gauntlet of barriers to change. They also know how to craft and implement solutions to many of those barriers. It seems unlikely that solutions to poverty on any scale, individual or global, are likely to occur without social work participation.

Yet another important reason for social workers to engage in policy practice is the clearly defined set of ethics and values they bring to the table. Policy-related discussions often bog down because the values of the participants are not clearly expressed. This is often seen when discussions degenerate to a point that one or both sides has stalled with no more logical arguments, simply saying something like, “We must do it this way.” What has often happened is that all effective arguments have been offered and countered, leaving participants with nothing more than their values as an argument. They may be unable to articulate those values because they have never sufficiently defined them. It may also be that they recognize that to speak their values clearly would actually undermine their argument by revealing less than humanitarian assumptions or motives. By clearly defining their values, social workers can verbalize much of the core motivation
for their argument. Social workers also, thereby, earn the right to ask opponents to verbalize theirs. The importance of the presence of a representative of such clear values and ethics in policy-related discussion is clear. Often, its only potential source is a social worker.

It’s clear that effective policy practice is important to social workers, their clients, the profession, the nation, and the world. It is also clear that any social worker may be called to engage in policy practice at any time. This chapter is about effective policy practice. Although it was written primarily with practice within the United States in mind, much of it is applicable to international practice. The chapter discusses preparation for policy practice, problem identification and definition, assembling a policy practice team, selecting an approach, conducting an analysis, developing an action plan, and evaluating the outcomes of the activities. It is intended to provide a general understanding of the processes, techniques, and strategies of policy practice, and to provide resources for gaining additional information and skill.

**Preparation of the Practitioner**

The process of preparing for policy practice might be conceived as a series of stages. The first involves the acquisition of a specific set of knowledge and skills needed to interact, assess, plan interventions, and evaluate within the policy arena. Practitioners who have reached this point in their training are able to perform all the basic functions necessary to engage in policy practice, and know how to acquire advanced knowledge, skills, and resources. Accredited BSSW and MSSW programs are designed to provide the basic knowledge and skills so that any graduates, however inadequate they may feel, have been taught the foundation of what they need to know. The Council on Social Work Education refers to this foundational set of knowledge and skills as “generalist” because it allows the practitioner to work across multiple settings.

Generalist knowledge refers to the theory and technique of successful professional intervention with clients and client systems. These theories and techniques are applied by practitioners as they interact with individuals, families, and groups. They include such activities as assessment, intervention planning, implementation of the selected intervention, and evaluation of the intervention’s effectiveness. The theories and techniques utilize and are guided by scientifically supported principles of human behavior, including insight from social work researchers as well as from multiple disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, medicine, political science, and public administration. Interventions are also structured and guided in accordance with social work ethics, values, and emphasis on cultural competence.

Generalist knowledge and skills can be applied across a variety of professional settings. For example, social workers in a clinical setting would use assessment skills, such as active listening, identification of client strengths, and identifying and understanding client relationships. Their
assessment might require knowledge of the theories of human development, psychopathology, and human motivation.

Although at first glance social workers’ efforts to change the way a law is written through interactions with a state legislature might seem very different from the work of clinicians, their tasks are, on closer examination, quite similar. For instance, a social worker engaging in policy practice might use the same skills. Assessment skills such as active listening would be used as the practitioner interviewed various experts about current policy and its effects. Strengths-based assessment would be used in discussions with the population policy was being designed to benefit. Skills for analyzing interpersonal relationships would be used when assessing the relationships between stakeholders likely to support or oppose an initiative.

Policy practitioners equipped to practice at the generalist level would be able to facilitate policy change such as the one intended by Benjamin earlier with minimal support from others. A presentation of their findings to the executive committee of the agency might be all that would be required. On the other hand, a practitioner trying to produce changes in federal legislation might need to assemble a workgroup composed of persons with specialized knowledge and relationships to deal with the intricacies of practice at that level. For example, the practitioner might want to recruit a group member with knowledge and experience in utilizing a specific form of policy analysis to help lead the process. Still, the principle that generalist skills are a sufficient foundation for policy practice holds, even at the federal level. Generalist skills would be used to identify, recruit, retain, and encourage the required participation by group members.

The second stage of preparation for effective policy practice involves the development of advanced policy knowledge and skills. These are not typically available in BSSW programs (although some might be gained through unique internship experiences). They are, however, included in CSWE-accredited MSSW programs. They may also be obtained by dedicated practitioners who participate in a lifetime learning process through seminars, readings, and interaction with more experienced professionals after they have received their degrees. Further, many of these skills can be developed while the practitioner is working. For example even if Alma from the case study earlier did not have a strong working knowledge of a model of policy analysis, she could obtain books like those by DiNitto and Cummins (2006) or Ellis (2003) and follow the procedures outlined therein. Advanced policy practice includes such components as mastery of at least one model of policy analysis, the ability to develop and implement a strategic plan to change policy, and a thorough knowledge of at least one major policy area.

The third stage of preparation includes knowledge of the people, issues, history, barriers, and political environment that exist within a specific policy arena. Considering Alma once again, despite having the basic knowledge and skills required for successful policy practice and having armed herself with the materials necessary to conduct an effective analysis, she may know little about the specifics of the persons, policies,
and situations that have led to the supplemental income cuts. She can
develop this knowledge as she proceeds with her analysis, but would do
well to bring others into the coalition who already have this knowledge to
help educate coalition members about the situations they will be facing.

Some practitioners may choose to advance to the fourth stage of prepa-
ration for policy practice. In the fourth stage practitioners become adept
at advanced forms of evaluation, analysis, and assessment such as cost-
benefit analysis and forecasting (Ellis, 2003). Many of these tasks can be
completed by specialists recruited to a team of practitioners. When funds
are available external experts can be hired to perform these analyses. For
example, if Alma wanted to include a retrospective evaluation of the effec-
tiveness of the income supplement cuts in her analysis she would have
several alternatives. First, she might draw on her BSSW training supple-
mented by books on outcome evaluation. Alternatively, she might ask a
professor trained in outcome evaluation to join her team. If no one was
willing to do the work on a pro bono basis, she might determine whether
funds might be available to hire an expert to do the evaluation.

It is important to note that, although these four stages represent four
distinct areas of competence, the lines between them are blurred. Practition-
ers do not necessarily obtain full proficiency at one level before progressing
to the next. For example, a person with BSSW-level training might have
lived and worked in a community for many years and might have obtained
many of the proficiencies of level three, but might lack the formal training
and resources available at level two. This practitioner might hastily seek
education in these areas, or might recruit team members who could bring
that level of knowledge and skill to the table. The process of building a
policy practice team follows.

**Assembling a Team**

In a situation like that of Benjamin no team may be necessary. He may be
able to assemble the necessary data and undertake the required activities
without any support from anyone else. Alma, however, is clearly in a
position where the support of others would be beneficial, perhaps essential.

Team members should be recruited strategically. They may bring one
of three essential components to the table. These components, the same
as those required for any successful task group, are influence, competence,
and motivation (Ellis, Crane, Gould, & Shatila, 2006).

Influence refers to the ability to directly affect the persons and forces
involved in a change. In policy practice this may mean the capacity to
access important stakeholders or to influence their opinions. It might also
refer to someone who has resources, such as funding or personnel, to sup-
port the effort. A policy practice workgroup may be highly skilled and
very motivated, but without adequate power and resources it is unlikely
to succeed.

Policy practice work groups must also contain members with compe-
tence. Competent members are those who have the essential knowledge and
skills to perform the tasks required for policy analysis and planning. Persons with competence bring such abilities as team-building skills, research skills, policy analysis skills, and action planning skills, as well as the ability to write and make public presentations effectively. In policy practice that crosses cultural or international borders, team members who understand those cultures and countries will be needed.

Motivation is also critical to a policy practice work group’s success. Persons with motivation bring a strong desire for change to the group. Persons with influence and competence may be very motivated, but often motivation comes from those who do not have an official role in the process. Highly motivated people might, for example, be found among the persons who are directly experiencing the policy problem.

Policy practitioners must assess their work groups to determine the degree to which these three components exist and the ways in which they can be mobilized. When components are deficient or absent, new members should be recruited who can bring them to the table. This process of assessment and recruitment should be ongoing to assure that changes in group composition or in the policy environment do not negatively impact the group’s effectiveness.

Identification, Definition, and Legitimization of the Problem

Policy practice may be viewed as a series of stages. Each stage includes the gathering of information about some aspect of the policy being considered for change. Although the latter stages may build on information gathered in earlier stages, the progression need not always be an orderly progression from one step to the next. The first and foundational stage, however, involves the identification, definition, and legitimization of the problem. It is important that most of the work on this stage be completed before a great deal of effort is expended on the other stages. Identification, definition, and legitimization assure that the problem is effectively recognized, carefully articulated, and appropriately acknowledged by persons with the power to make changes.

Identification refers to recognizing the presence of a problem. At this point the practitioner may not understand much about the problem, but does recognize that people are affected by it. Benjamin reached the identification stage when he noticed an inordinate number of people who were not returning to receive services. Alma and her coalition have identified the problem of inadequate income and believe it to be the result of the income supplement cutbacks. They may, however, need some additional research to firmly establish that the cutbacks are the source of the problem.

When policy practitioners define a problem, they put it in writing. Although there is some disagreement between experts as to the exact content of the definition, four themes are commonly recognized. These themes
are population, problem, perspectives, and policy (Ellis, 2003). A comprehensive problem statement, then, describes what population is affected; what its members lack and what prevents them from obtaining it (the problem); the perspectives of those who experience the problem; and the policy that addresses, causes, or should address the problem.

Legitimization occurs when some authoritative policy-making body officially says that it exists. Although thousands might become homeless and foster care numbers might skyrocket, for the purposes of policy no problem exists until persons in power acknowledge it. So, in the case of Alma, if policy makers in her state have not recognized that the problem of inadequate income is impacting persons in their communities to the degree that it is, her work group must focus on bringing it to the attention of the legislators. Armed with a well-researched, well-articulated problem statement, they can also enhance the probability that the decision makers will perceive and define the problem as they do.

It is also important to understand the degree to which policy at each level of government influences the problem. Some problems are primarily addressed at a single level. For example, Social Security provides the primary body of policy for disability insurance. Other problems, such as child abuse, neglect, and abandonment, are addressed at multiple levels: federal, state, local, and agency. In some areas of policy court decisions have also influenced the interpretation of policy, meaning that case law must also be considered to completely understand an area of policy. Practitioners must be certain they have collected and understand policy at every level to adequately formulate their definition. For example, although Alma’s group appears to be dealing with a problem that has been primarily created at the state level, income maintenance policy also exists at the federal level and in some areas may be influenced locally as well. The group would need to know what responsibilities lie at which level and how the policy provisions interact between them.

Practitioners working in countries other than or in addition to the United States may find a political landscape that differs from the one described here. Levels of government that exist in the United States might not exist in many countries, for example. In other situations they might exist, but the distribution of responsibilities and power may vary. Where the structure of the government differs, practitioners should clearly identify the levels of government, assign them names, and list the responsibilities of each level in the specific area of policy being addressed. Strategies discussed in this book and in other resources can be adapted accordingly.

An additional important function of the problem statement is that it helps the group members determine whether they are all in agreement as to the nature of the problem. The problem statement will form the basis of all the rest of the work the group does. It guides the way the problem is perceived, the area of policy selected for study, and the kinds of solutions that will be proposed. Obtaining agreement between the work group members is also important to assure that they remain united during the action
phase of the initiative. Unity is critical to success, and constant, effective communication and shared understanding promote unity within the team.

Although a policy definition is drafted very early in the analysis process, it should be reviewed periodically to assure that information gained during research has not changed the group’s understanding. When they discover that their understanding has changed, they should adjust their definition accordingly.

**Selecting an Approach**

There are several approaches (often referred to as *models*) for conducting a policy analysis. Basically, the term *approach* or *model* refers to a method of collecting information about specific aspects of a body of policy. Those who analyze policy, meaning that they critically examine the aspects of the body of policy associated with their identified problem, are engaging in policy practice.

Dobelstein (1996) identified three general categories of policy analysis: *behavioral*, *incremental*, and *criteria-based*. Most forms of analysis fall into one of these three categories. Each has its own set of strengths and limitations, and each is, therefore, best used in different settings. Behavioral models use scientific methods and statistical analyses to identify and choose from among a group of alternatives. Incremental models identify several potential solutions, then piece portions of those solutions together to produce feasible alternatives. The final choice is made by weighing each alternative against the values of the public. This helps to determine both how useful and how acceptable each solution might be.

Approaches that are criteria-based share some of the characteristics of the behavioral and incremental models. As in the incremental model, several alternative solutions are identified as the initial steps. The solutions are then evaluated and ranked in the order of their level of acceptability to the public. Finally, the alternatives are evaluated using research methods common to behavioral models. The goal is to determine the cost, benefits, and feasibility of each alternative. A solution is then selected based on the values ranking and the research.

It is important to remember that one type of analysis may be more appropriate for one set of circumstances than for another. For example, behavioral methods are probably best suited for environments in which research reports are either already present or readily funded, and where public norms and values are unlikely to have a strong impact on a decision. Incremental methods may be best for situations in which significant compromises between competing proposals can be anticipated and public values are expected to play a major role. Criteria-based approaches are likely to be more effective when a comprehensive approach is needed to address multiple aspects of the policy environment. For example, Benjamin can probably anticipate that the values of the persons operating his agency are similar to his own and that he will not face much opposition to his
initiative. A behavioral approach in which he collects and analyzes a little more data and presents his findings to the executive board will probably be adequate for his situation. Alma’s group, however, is likely to need a more comprehensive approach. The group members will need to collect relevant research and supplement it with some work of their own. Research alone is likely to be inadequate, however, because of the powerful and contradictory values that affect income maintenance policy (Elwood, 1989). In this case a criteria-based method may be desirable.

Regardless of which type of analysis is selected, there are certain categories of information that must be collected and considered. These categories include: (a) information about the history and current status of the problem and the policy that has been developed to address it, (b) identification of the norms and values of the voting public, (c) recognition of the political alliances that will support or oppose the proposal, (d) review of the current system of agencies that compose the service delivery system, (e) generation of a series of alternative solutions, (f) collection or production of appropriate professional analyses, and (g) examination of potential unintended consequences. Based on the analysis of some combination of these categories of information, a decision is made as to which alternative to recommend (Ellis, 2003).

Each of the three general types of policy analysis selects from among these categories of information, using some and ignoring or minimizing others. For example, a purely behavioral approach might not require information about the norms and values of the public or about political alliances. Yet an incremental approach might consider this information vital. Each of the categories of analysis includes specific models, often named for the person who designed them. It is from these models that policy practitioners choose when they plan an analysis. Proficiency in one of them was identified as a part of the second level of preparation for policy practice identified earlier in this chapter.

Some models also include action planning for change (Ellis, 2003). Others do not include this phase. This omission reflects the diversity of roles assumed by policy practitioners in various policy initiatives. At times the practitioner might be asked to perform an analysis only, with the person or organization commissioning the analysis making the decisions as to how to proceed. At other times the practitioner and his or her team might include action plan development and implementation as a part of their analysis.

Conducting an Analysis

After a model has been selected, the practitioner or team must implement the analysis. In a team this can be accomplished by matching tasks to each member’s area of proficiency. In Alma’s group, for example, she may have recruited BSSWs or MSSWs who are particularly good at Internet and library research. These members might be selected for tasks such as identifying and obtaining current policies at every level. High-level agency executives with
many years working in the community might be asked to identify potential friends and foes of the proposal. A university professor might be asked to develop a plan for further study.

It is important that the individual tasks and responsibilities of each step of an analysis be identified, committed to writing, and assigned to team members with specific due dates and methods of reporting the results. In the section earlier several categories of information that are used in policy analysis were identified. Practitioners must not only know what those categories are, but must know and be able to use strategies for obtaining accurate data from each.

Information About the History and Current Status of the Problem and Policy

One effective strategy for accumulating information about the history and status of a policy is online resources. In the United States and many other countries there are websites at federal, state (or territorial), and local levels from which information can be obtained. In Mexico, for example, practitioners might start at http://www.presidencia.gob.mx/ At the federal level in the United States, for example, there are sites for each branch of the federal government. A good starting point for locating these is http://www.whitehouse.gov/ Links from that site lead to the website for the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. There are also sites for obtaining the actual policy documents, such as that of the Office of the Law Revision Counsel (OLRC) (http://uscode.house.gov/search/criteria.shtml) and THOMAS, Legislative Information (http://thomas.loc.gov/).

State and local governments also often have websites that can be good sources for both policy and history. Most can be readily identified by using an Internet search engine with descriptor words such as the state’s name and “government” or “state government.” At all levels it is important to remember that policy documents may also exist within the executive branches of the respective governments. For instance, at the federal level presidential directives, executive orders, and administrative codes all contain policy.

Library research can provide useful information as well as hard copies of many policy documents. Recent documents and draft legislation may be difficult to obtain there because of the delay involved in getting the documents published and catalogued into government documents sections of local libraries. Still, for locating less recent documents and compiling information about the history of a policy area, U.S. public library government documents areas can be helpful. The availability of such library information varies between countries yet can be invaluable when it is accessed.

In many countries, including the United States, a great deal of information can be obtained from personal contact with government employees such as legislators, bureaucrats, and administrative staff. Such sources are often aware not only of the history of a policy area, but also of current trends
and initiatives. Although higher-level elected officials may be difficult to access, members of their staff are often interested in providing information to those who ask. Their motivation may be varied. Some may hope that their friendly assistance will garner votes. Other may anticipate learning more about your initiative. Still others may simply wish to be helpful. Regardless of motivation, many will be willing to talk.

Other good Internet resources include the websites of special interest groups, news organizations, and other organizations that analyze or comment on social policy. Even radical or oppositional sites can be important sources of information. These sites often offer perspectives not readily available in more traditional sites and may emphasize elements neglected by those in current positions of power.

Another good source of information is textbooks and similar resources used for training in the chosen policy area. Many such documents review the history of policy and offer insight into the forces that have shaped it. Although the information may not be in depth, the texts may offer references that provide more comprehensive materials.

Identification of the Norms and Values of the Voting Public

The importance of the role of norms and values in policy making was described in earlier sections of this chapter. Proposals that run contrary to the predominant values of the voting public, or that cannot be made to appear consistent with those values, are likely to fail. Practitioners, then, must understand the values of the stakeholders (including the voting public), must be able to articulate those values, and must have the skills to be able to explain their proposals in a way that persons with a variety of values will find attractive.

There are many sources from which stakeholder values can be identified. News reports, for example, often contain statements of the motivations of legislators, the comments of other public figures, and a few reactions from members of the general public. Although media sources often have significant limitations they can provide insight into the norms and values of many different stakeholders and stakeholder groups.

Published books and articles (other than publications from media sources) are another useful resource for identifying values. In some policy areas relevant values have been carefully and accurately documented. For example, in Poor Support: Poverty in the American Family, Elwood (1989) identified a group of opposing values that underlie income maintenance policy in the United States. Recognizing those values is critical to understanding the historical development of policy in this area and to planning successful initiatives. Popular books, textbooks, academic journals, and popular periodicals can also help practitioners identify and articulate norms and values.

One simple way of determining the values of an individual or group is to ask them. Although some may try to mask oppositional positions with acceptable terminology, asking for a statement of position from an influential person or political group will usually provide useful information.
The statement can also be compared to the past voting records, service records, or political activities of the individual or group in question should further clarification be desired.

The values of larger groups can often be identified through focus groups or surveys. Focus groups would include experts who are likely to know the positions of experts and members of the general population. Surveys might be sent directly to citizens, and their results tabulated and summarized for the policy practice workgroup.

However information about norms and values is collected, it is important that practitioners be thorough in gathering perspectives. Thoroughness may be a particular challenge when dealing with international issues because of the diversity of groups and complexity of perspectives that may be involved. For example, a practitioner working on policy changes to benefit Kurdish immigrants to the United States might be tempted to assume that a survey within a single federal relocation area would provide a representative sampling of norms and values. However, a quick Internet search would identify 10 or more political groups currently operating within Kurdistan. Many of these groups hold very different ideals. Practitioners who wished to understand the norms and values of the Kurdish people would need to have information about all these groups, information that might or might not be available in a single relocation area.

Recognition of the Political Alliances That Will Support or Oppose the Proposal

When analyzing policy it is critical to learn what individuals and groups are likely to support or oppose a proposal. A part of understanding this political landscape is knowing about the current political parties, identifying the existing political alliances, and becoming aware of any special groups that may be interested in the initiative’s outcome.

Political parties are organized groups of people who share similar values and political ideals. They unite to select candidates who then compete with persons from other political parties for offices or positions within the government. In the United States there are two primary political parties: Democrats and Republicans. Historically, Republicans have held conservative values and Democrats have held liberal values, although in recent years the differences between the two have become far less pronounced. Other parties have come and gone, and some that currently exist don’t always enter a candidate in elections. The U.S. system remains predominately a two-party system.

Other countries may have only one political party, or may have a great variety of parties emphasizing an assortment of values. Regardless of the number and philosophical position of the parties, it is important to know what groups believe as well as what position they are likely to take on the proposed initiative.

The political landscape is often also filled with political alliances. These alliances may range from formal, collaborative enterprises with clear,
written agreements, to informal arrangements made verbally between individuals and small groups. They may occur on either side of an issue or between political opponents. Alliances may be related to party loyalty or may have grown from an assortment of personal situations. Regardless of their nature and source, political alliances can be powerful influences in the political arena. In addition, they seem to exist in virtually every culture. Practitioners must identify them, must understand the basis for the alliances, and must plan strategies to deal with them effectively.

Review of the Current System of Agencies That Compose the Service Delivery System

Effective policy practice requires understanding the way in which the intent of a policy or body of policy is operationalized and implemented. Most often this begins with a policy-making body (such as a legislature) and extends through government agencies that either fund, provide guidance and support for, or implement (or some combination of these three) to other agencies, often private, that actually deliver the services. In the United States these other agencies are typically either not-for-profit or for-profit. In other countries they might be for-profit or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

When past attempts have been made to address a social problem yet the problem still exists, it is possible that something within the delivery system is either creating or contributing to the problem. In the example of Benjamin, the problem of inadequate income is not created within his agency, nor is the problem of inadequate service provision. But the failure of the agency to make its clients aware of funding alternatives does contribute to inadequate service provision.

Understanding the policy-making system allows the practitioner to determine the level at which a problem should be addressed. For example, although income maintenance policy is primarily a federal area within the United States, Alma’s work group faces an unusual situation in which the state had provided a supplement, but has eliminated the supplement during budget cuts. Because the group probably has a greater probability of producing changes at a state level and because the problem was generated at a state level, the group would probably do well to address it at that level.

Generation of an Alternative Solution or Alternative Solutions

Policy practitioners must also generate alternative solutions. They may do this by devising their own solutions, or by resurrecting solutions proposed by others in the past. The solutions may be broad and comprehensive, or may offer an incremental approach, in which smaller aspects of the problem are addressed individually. Although a single solution will probably ultimately be offered, practitioners often find that generating a variety of possibilities from which they then choose is the most effective approach.
The information gathered during other portions of the analysis should be used both to inform the development of alternatives and to choose between them. The solution ultimately recommended should have a strong probability of being effective, be feasible to implement, and be desirable to a sufficient number of stakeholders to make its acceptance likely.

**Collection or Production of Appropriate Professional Analyses**

Many types of professional analyses are available to examine the performance of current policy and to predict how a new proposal is likely to perform. Options for professional analysis include program evaluation, needs assessment, cost-benefit analysis, forecasting, sensitivity analysis, allocation formulae, quick decision analysis, and political feasibility analysis (Ellis, 2003). A thorough discussion of these methods is beyond the scope of this chapter, and most require specialized training to conduct effectively. A careful search of available literature may yield a number of such analyses already in existence. Alternatively, policy practice work groups might hire an expert to conduct a professional analysis or recruit a group member who possesses the necessary knowledge and skill.

**Examination of Potential Unintended Consequences**

Whenever policy changes are enacted, there is the potential for unintended consequences to result. It seems unlikely, for instance, that the state legislators who approved the cuts in Alma’s case study anticipated their devastating effects on other social service systems. A little forethought on the part of the policy makers might have prevented the current crisis.

Policy practice work groups can try to anticipate what they might not otherwise expect by using a variety of techniques. For example, they can brainstorm best- and worst-case scenarios, or research the results of similar initiatives in their chosen policy area or in similar policy areas. Alternatively, they could ask other experts in the area what they might expect, using either individual interviews or focus groups.

**Selection of an Alternative or Alternatives**

If the practitioner or work group develops more than a single alternative solution, most situations will require that the one perceived to be the best is selected for proposal and support. The “best” alternative will be the one that is some mixture of the most likely to succeed, the most feasible, the most acceptable, and the least likely to produce undesirable consequences.

Practitioners may make this decision through informal discussion and evaluation, or may develop a more formal method of scoring alternatives such as the marginal numerical attributions used in criteria-based methods.

It is important to remember that a solution seen as “best” for one community or geographical area may not be best for another. This is particularly true when international issues are involved. Practitioners who are considering recommendations that will impact conditions in other
countries may need to remember that needs, values, support systems, and similar conditions are likely to vary between and within countries. International policy practice requires a thorough understanding of every area that will be affected.

**Action Planning**

In some situations practitioners may be asked only to analyze policy and provide a recommended solution or solutions. At other times they may need to develop a strategy for bringing the change to fruition. Although this might seem a daunting task, a similar process is included in any CSWE-accredited MSSW program in the form of strategic planning.

In strategic planning an overall mission statement is prepared, then goals, objectives, and tasks are identified. These goals, objectives, and tasks are, in fact, the steps that must be undertaken to accomplish the mission. When the tasks have been identified and articulated, each is assigned to an individual or a small group and a date for completion and a means of reporting the results to the overall group are specified. The results are usually recorded either in log or matrix form to allow for easy tracking.

The capacities individual members bring to a policy analysis work group should be important considerations when tasks are assigned for the action plan. Persons who bring competence in public relations, advertising, and media relations should be involved in the completion of tasks of that nature. Those who bring influence may best be involved in contact with and persuasion of decision makers. The persons who excel in motivation may be the ones with the drive and persistence to prepare and distribute brochures, make multiple phone calls, and prepare and supervise mass mailings. Some group members may want to participate in more than one type of activity, but most should be encouraged to direct their primary efforts toward those activities in which they bring the greatest capacity.

**Evaluating the Outcomes**

Effective social work practice requires effective evaluation. This is as true for policy practice as it is for clinical work or program development. Only when outcome measures are chosen, variables are tracked, and the results are analyzed and reported can practitioners know whether the goals they set out to meet have been accomplished.

Policy outcome evaluation uses one or more of the forms of professional analysis discussed in an earlier section. Perhaps in most cases it involves an outcome evaluation design that looks at target conditions that existed before a new policy was introduced and compares them to those conditions after the policy has gone into effect. For example, Alma’s group might track income, referrals to child welfare, homelessness, and medical service utilization rates. If income increased among the target client group and referrals to child welfare, homelessness, and medical service utilization
among the target client group decreased, this might be seen as evidence that the team’s policy intervention was effective.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has identified and described the primary processes involved in policy practice. These processes include: (a) preparation of the practitioner, (b) assembling a team, (c) identification, definition, and legitimization of the problem, (d) selecting an approach for analysis, (e) conducting the analysis, and (f) evaluating the outcomes. The processes were presented primarily to address case studies based on conditions typical of the United States, but comments were included to make them more relevant to international policy practice where such comments were necessary.

**Key Terms**

- Global
- Legislative
- Policy analysis
- Policy practice
- Social welfare

**Review Questions for Critical Thinking**

1. Ellis writes that successful policy practice includes “putting a team together.” Who would you want on your team; what kind of knowledge and experiences would you find helpful?
2. Do you think policy practice is more effective at the local, regional, state, or national level of government? Or, is policy practice equally effective?
3. Identify one social issue and develop a policy practice strategy.
4. Does it surprise you that the longest serving member in the history of the United States Senate is a social worker, Barbara Mikulski (D-MD)?
5. Do you believe that the policy practice model suggested by Ellis, as well as those models set forth by others, are systematic and logical in actual practice?

**Online Resources**

- Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest: [http://clpi.org/about-us](http://clpi.org/about-us)
- Political Action for Candidate Election: [http://www.socialworkers.org/pace/default.asp](http://www.socialworkers.org/pace/default.asp)
References


