

A Brief Guide to Understanding Policy Development



Rural Communities Impacting Policy

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With the help and guidance from the
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Thank-you to Shilo Gempton for her diagram
outlining the contents of the paper (see last page)

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ISBN 0-9780913-0-2

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The goal of the Rural Communities Impacting Policy (RCIP) Project is to increase the ability of rural communities and organizations in Nova Scotia to access and use social science research in order to influence and develop policy that contributes to the health and sustainability of communities. RCIP is a 5-year research project (2001-2006), funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and co-sponsored by the Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre at Dalhousie University and the Coastal Communities Network.

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Effective public policy is facilitated by community involvement in the policy-making process. Unfortunately, policy development for people in most rural communities may seem to be a process that does not really concern them or something over which they have little control. They may feel that the policy-making process is something that takes place only among government and the more influential members of society. There may be confusion about how policy is made and the average person may feel far removed from the policy development process. The lack of understanding around policy development combined with potential value conflicts between communities and public policy-makers can lead to community members feeling alienated from and frustrated by the policy-making process.

Community members and organizations do not have to remain on the sidelines when it comes to policy development. They can choose to become active in the creation of policy or advocate for change in a policy that may have an effect on their community. However, before members of rural communities can effectively participate in public policy development, they must have an understanding of what policy is, why it is important, and how it is developed. Further, community members need to feel their participation in the creation of public policy will benefit the people of their communities, region or province. To accomplish this, public and community awareness of how people who are directly affected by policy can contribute to policy development or change is necessary (Hanrahan, 1995).

“Development of good policy is carried out by and with people, not on or to people. It improves both the ability of individuals to take action and the capacity of groups, organizations or committees to influence change.” (World Health Organization, 1997)

What is Policy?

“A policy is a declaration that defines the intention of a community, organization or government’s goals and priorities. Policies outline the role, rules and procedures. They create a framework within which the administration and staff can perform their assigned duties” (Mayer & Thompson, 1982). Public policies are aimed at the whole population or at specific, targeted groups, and can be created by all levels of government. Policies can also be created by institutions such as school boards, hospitals, workplaces or community organizations. Public policies are made through a process involving citizens, government officials and elected officials who, ideally, work together to set an agenda for the common good.

Policies shape our daily lives by regulating such things as where and when citizens may use pesticides on their lawns, which medications and treatments a provincial drug plan will cover, or whether an employer has an obligation to hire women and visible minorities. (Devon Dodd & Hebert Boyd, 2000, pg.1)

Some Important Functions of Policy

- they reflect the ideology and values of an organization or institution
- they are the principles that guide action
- they are planning tools for goal setting and service delivery
- they provide the terms of reference for setting program priorities and guiding program development
- they help set roles and delimit or define areas within the organization's role
- they house the rules and regulations and provide guidance for routine, unique and controversial decisions
- they provide the justification for and the sanctioning of resource allocations (e.g., budget, staff time)
- they provide a tool to assist in evaluating progress and in providing accountability to constituents, funding agencies, etc.

(from Lyons et al., 2001, pg.7)

Policy may be developed and applied at many levels and may range from formal legislation and regulations to the informal rules by which organizations function. For example, government policy related to children, youth and health is developed at international, national/federal, provincial/territorial, and regional/district/local/community levels by individuals (elected officials and public servants) across a number of sectors, including health, education, social

services, recreation, finance, justice, labour, transportation and environment (Devon Dodd & Hebert Boyd, 2000).

Communities and citizens can express their views concerning public policy issues through different forums including

- ◆ Consultation and engagement of groups and citizens by the government
- ◆ Government initiated referenda
- ◆ Legislative hearings
- ◆ Elections
- ◆ Royal Commissions
- ◆ Town hall meetings
- ◆ Surveys and opinion polls
- ◆ Policy round tables
- ◆ Petitions, demonstrations, letter-writing campaigns or other advocacy strategies

Key Players Involved in Policy Making

There are many individuals and organizations involved in changing or creating policy. Understanding who these players are and the role they play can help individuals and organizations throughout the policy-making process. The roles of both government and non-government organizations involved in the policy making process are briefly described below.

Key Players Involved in the Policy-Making Process

<u>Government</u>	<u>Non-Government</u>
Legislature or House of Assembly	Interest Groups
Cabinet	Mass Media
Bureaucracy	Community
Privy Council Office	Board of Directors
	Regional Boards
	Lobbying Groups
	Individuals

Don't expect someone to change something if they have no influence in that area. Be sure to identify and reach out to those who do have the authority to make policy changes. (Lyons et al., (in press))

Government

The powers of the federal and provincial governments are defined under the constitution. Provincial governments, by way of legislation, create municipal or local governments and allow them to exercise certain provincial powers for the benefit of local residents (Hanrahan, 1995). Because different levels of

government have different responsibilities, it is very important for a community organization that wants to achieve policy change to know to which level of government to target its effort. Important government players in policy development at both the federal and provincial levels include:

(1) Legislature or the House of Assembly

The Legislature or House of Assembly passes laws in the form of legislation containing a policy. While members may support a policy direction, policy is rarely initiated in this forum (Hanrahan, 1995). However, the functions of the Legislature or House of Assembly provide opportunities for influencing policy by being “crucial forums where social problems are highlighted and policies to address them are demanded” (Howlett, 1995, pg. 54).

(2) The Cabinet

The Prime Minister/Premier and Ministers are collectively called the Cabinet and are the principal decision makers (Marshall & Cashaback, 2001). When a Minister has a policy proposal, he or she will take it to Cabinet for approval. From here, the proposal is referred to an appropriate Cabinet committee where it is examined and debated. Following this debate, the committee will make its recommendations to Cabinet for approval. The recommendation is almost always ratified by Cabinet (Marshall & Cashaback, 2001).

Go It On Your Own, or Go to Cabinet – How Does a Minister Know?

Ministers in the Canadian system have considerable autonomy. The distinction between what a minister can and cannot do on his/her own isn't always black and white, but rules combined with decades of tradition means that it is fairly well understood. Ultimately, the prime minister (through the Privy Council Office (PCO)) has the final say. Regular dialogue between officials and their PCO counterparts helps ensure that proposals requiring cabinet approval are identified at an early stage.

(from Institute of Governance, 2000, pg. 14)

(3) Bureaucracy

The bureaucracy consists of the deputy minister, senior officials, professionals and staff whose direction comes from the Government and legislation. The officials are members of the public service who study proposed policy initiatives, provide recommendations to the decision-makers and sometime initiate policy development.

The Deputy Minister and The Policy Process

As the minister's top bureaucrat, the deputy minister is the connecting point between policy and implementation. An important factor contributing to the successful functioning of the policy-making process in Canada is the degree to which ministers have been able to work productively with their deputy ministers. As the minister's top non-partisan policy adviser, the deputy is expected to anticipate trends, initiate policy ideas, advise the minister on his own policy ideas and on Policy initiatives elsewhere in the government. (Institute on Governance, 2001)

(4) Privy Council Office

The Privy Council Office (PCO) functions as Cabinet secretariat, which makes it responsible for the smooth functioning of Cabinet. The PCO manages the flow of business related to the decision-making process: it arranges meetings, circulates agendas, distributes documents, provides advice to the chairperson of each committee on agenda items and records Cabinet minutes and decisions. A critical function of the PCO is to ensure that (1) all Ministers and their officials, who ought to be interested in a policy proposal, are given opportunity to consider it in advance and to express their views, and (2) all Ministers and their officials interested in a policy proposal are operating from a common base of sound information. (Institute on Governance, 2000).

(5) Voluntary Planning

Voluntary Planning is a vehicle through which Nova Scotia's private sector has had input into the crafting of economic policy and development planning. Voluntary planning operates at arm's length to the Provincial government with a mandate to engage non-government volunteers and citizens in policy discussions important to the future of Nova Scotia. Members participate on task forces, project teams and sector committees representing many aspects of the economy and society. Policy advice and recommendations go forward

through an independent board to the Premier and executive council via the Ministry of Treasury and Policy Board (Voluntary Planning, www.gov.ns.ca/vp).

Policy Briefs

One important way to communicate to government is through a policy brief. A policy brief is a document prepared by an individual or organization that explains the policy issue and the community's stance and plan concerning that issue. Policy briefs may be presented in a public forum held by a ministerial task force established by a government department or may be delivered directly to the government department involved. The exact format of these briefs vary depending upon the government department.

Non-Government

There are a number of key players outside of government through which the public may influence policy development. Each of these players has a different role. Understanding these roles can allow communities and organizations to have a greater influence on the policy-making process. Five important players at the non-government level include:

(1) Interest Groups

Interest groups are organizations which have as one of their goals to influence the decisions of public officials. One tactic frequently used by interest groups is lobbying -- pressuring politicians primarily through direct contact and providing information. Members of interest groups are often very knowledgeable about a particular issue and can be a source of valuable information. This information can help in developing and implementing policy.

(2) Mass Media

The mass media represents the major source of public information concerning policy issues and government activity. The media such as television, radio, and newspapers are in a position to influence the preferences of the government and the public on many social issues. Media portrayal of social and political issues often influences how they are understood by the public and government and whether or not action is taken on the issue. (Howlett, 1995).

(3) Community

Community may represent people living within the same geographic area or may refer to a group of people with similar policy interests and concerns. The community can also include municipal politicians, opinion leaders, and representatives of various interests at the community level. Policy change can be initiated at this level (Hanrahan, 1995, pg.3). An example of a community organization working together for policy change is the Coastal Communities Network (CCN) who represents communities in Nova Scotia working to affect policy concerning issues important to coastal and rural communities.

(4) Board of Directors

A Board of Directors is a legal body managing either a private company or non-profit organization. A Board can develop and implement policy affecting its own organization. A decision of a Board to support a policy put forth by another group could be helpful in trying to promote adoption of legislation by government (Hanrahan, 1995, pg.3).

(5) Individuals

The individual can champion an action and encourage the involvement of others to help themselves or influence policy decisions. Individuals can make views known to an elected representative to encourage or discourage support of a policy. Ultimately, politicians are accountable to each individual citizen for the policies of government.

Policy may originate from the community's organized efforts to create change or with one person (a champion or an initiator) who organizes a working group to advance a cause. (Hanrahan, 1995, pg. 4)

Timeframe for Policy Development

The time frame for policy development is defined by many factors including the issue itself, government agendas, media attention, and public

pressure. Policy development can range from an immediate crisis reaction to a more proactive approach.

Crisis Reaction

The path leading from an idea to public policy is sometimes short and direct, usually brought about by a “crisis situation” that imposes a very short time frame within which policy must be created. When such a “crisis reaction” takes place, the time taken for policy development is shortened and some of the steps usually taken in the policy-making process may be condensed or left out entirely. In a well-publicized example, in June of 2001, the Nova Scotia Government developed policy in a very short time period through the creation of Bill-68 which removed the right of nurses to legally strike.

Proactive Approach

In most cases, the development of policy is not in reaction to a crisis situation, but rather follows a process that allows for the full application of research and input from interested organizations and individuals. For a policy development process to be truly effective, it should be based on accurate, up-to-date information about the issue or situation. Knowledge concerning the effectiveness of possible interventions and initiatives that have previously been used will help those involved in the policy-making process to understand the potential effects of implementing a new policy. Understanding the steps typically involved in a proactive approach to policy development can help individuals and organizations play an active role in the policy process.

Steps to Influencing Policy

Although the policy process is not cut and dried, there are steps that communities can follow which will put them on the road to affecting, understanding and influencing policy. The framework for policy development/change presented here is based on that developed by Lyons et al, (in press).

Sometimes the path [to policy] is barely visible, obscured by the struggle of contending interests and ideas, by the inconsistencies or contradictions of government action and inaction or by fuzziness in how an issue is defined.
(Doern & Phidd, 1988, pg. 43)

(1) Identify the Problem or Issue

The process of policy change begins with identifying one or two key issues that the community wants to take action on. This requires isolating the problem and its causes. Understanding the problem and its causes often requires gathering information about the issue. It is also important at this point to identify individuals and groups who may be sympathetic to your issue and may be potential supporters. Not until the problem is properly understood and potential supporters identified, should you move on to the next step of identifying preferred solutions and developing an action plan. An example of the process of identifying a problem or issue comes from the Voluntary Planning Taskforce on Non-Resident Land Ownership. While the original mandate of this task force called upon focusing on matters related to the possibility of imposing higher taxes on non-resident property owners, it became evident soon in the consultation process that Nova Scotians in general identified other issues which they felt were a greater issue. These issues were related to overall land management practices, the need to create a long-term access strategy, and protection from escalating taxes on their own homesteads. Although these issues were similar to the original mandate of the taskforce, it was deemed necessary to broaden the dialogue so as to allow for a thorough examination of each of these concerns (Voluntary Planning, 2001).

(2) Identify Preferred Solutions and Develop an Action Plan

The next step after identifying the one or two key policy issues is to generate a solution(s) to them. This can be done by looking at how similar situations were dealt with, deciding on what information you need to deal with your particular key policy issues, figuring out who can help, soliciting ideas from

the community, and thinking about the short and long term consequences of various solutions. Once a solution has been identified, decide on the best strategy to influence the decision making related to the identified problem or issue. Selecting the best strategy and developing an action plan to carry out the strategy may be difficult. With help from other community organizations as well as universities, research centers, government agencies, other communities, and special interest groups you will be able to develop an action plan that outlines your objectives and the activities needed to implement your solution.

Action plans let everyone know what is to be done, how it is to be done, and who is going to do it (Hanrahan, 1995, pg. 8)

(3) Implement the Action Plan

Once you have decided upon an action plan, you need to outline the steps that must be taken to carry out the strategies you have chosen. Some examples of potential actions include educating the public about your issue through the media; sending letters to appropriate authorities explaining the issue and requesting action; submitting a policy brief; presenting the issue at a public forum; and contacting your municipal, provincial, and federal government representatives. The timing of these actions may be critical and must be considered carefully to maximize their impact. Usually, keeping actions positive, constructive, and tactful will make it more likely that you can gain the support of the public as well as those who can change the policy (MacDonald, 1997). It is also important to be willing to listen and consider people's objections or suggestions. By offering to cooperate with decision-makers, you open the door for a positive reception of your issue.

(4) Monitor and Evaluate Your Progress

Policy change can be a long process. You should monitor and evaluate the progress you are making with the goal of identifying positive changes as well as areas that still need improvement. It is important to consider both the process

itself as well as impacts and outcomes. When considering the process, you should ask yourself: what have you done, what worked, what did not work, and why? In terms of impacts and outcomes, you should assess whether there has been an increase in public and government awareness and support toward your issue, whether there have been any actual policy changes, and if so, whether implementation of the policy resulted in the desired effect.

Tips For Influencing Policy

- ◆ Gain a good understanding of the issue, do your homework
- ◆ Have constructive ideas to put forward
- ◆ Open communication with government officials
- ◆ Understand the role of government in policy making
- ◆ Identify and communicate with potential supporters
- ◆ Launch a public information effort
- ◆ Realize that policy change takes time, be patient and persistent
- ◆ Expect setbacks and learn from them

Horizontal Policy Making

Changes to funding and programs have placed a greater emphasis on working across sectors (working horizontally) to find solutions to complex social problems. Horizontal policy making differs from both the more traditional top-down (government initiated) and bottom-up (grass roots or community initiated) approach to policy making. Both policy makers and communities have started to shift the policy-making process from traditional consultations to one of citizen engagement. In 1999, Federal and Provincial governments signed the Social Union Framework Agreement (SUFA) which represents a growing desire on the part of policy makers and communities to engage each other in meaningful, inclusive, transparent, and collaborative policy-making processes -- in policy making that is horizontal, with shared information and decision making across

sectors (Devon Dodd & Hebert Boyd, 2001). With SUFA, the Federal and Provincial governments have committed to “working in partnership with individuals, families, communities, voluntary organizations, business and labour and to ensure appropriate opportunities for Canadians to have meaningful input into social policies and programs.”(Devon Dodd & Hebert Boyd, 2001). The shift towards a more collaborative, horizontal approach to policy making encourages all parties to reflect and learn. It promotes a focus on common ground and recognizes that citizens and communities have important knowledge and experience to add to the policy debates (Devon Dodd & Hebert Boyd, 2001). An example of horizontal planning comes from the Nova Scotia Rural Team, a government agency whose mandate is to build and support integrated partnerships within Federal and Provincial departments in order to foster innovative and sustainable rural communities (Rural Secretariat, 2001). In fall, 2001 in response to feedback presented at the Nova Scotia Regional Rural Conference, six rural community members were nominated to sit on the Rural Team. This indicates a transition of the Rural Team from government-only to a community-government partnership.

Conclusion

This paper provided a brief overview of the policy-making process highlighting what policy is, key players, timeframes, and steps to influencing policy. Having influence in the policy process may seem out of reach to many citizens of rural communities. However, armed with information and support, rural communities can take a more active role in influencing, affecting and creating policy.

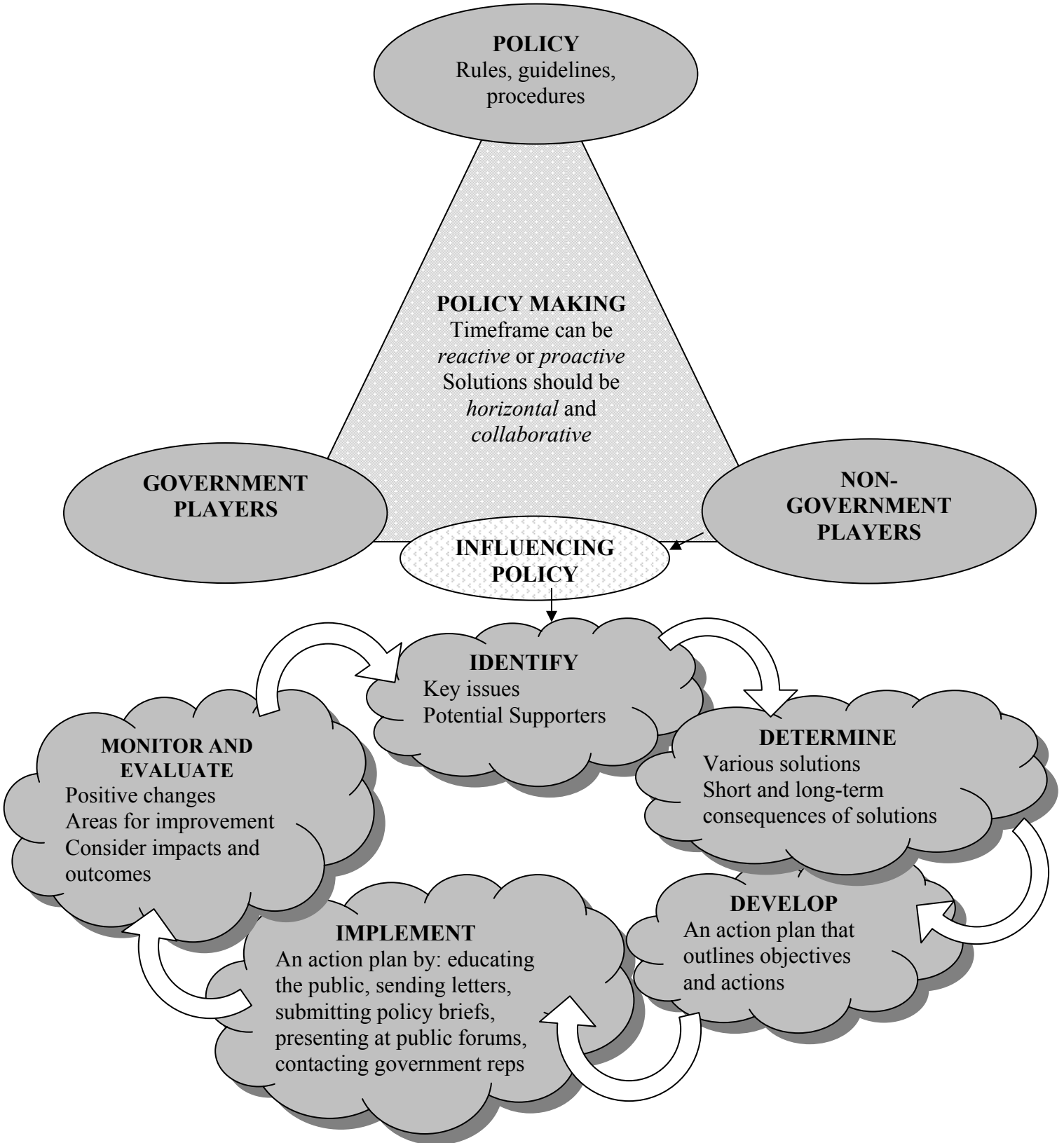
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UNDERSTANDING POLICY DEVELOPMENT
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