This is How to Think About and Achieve Public Policy Success
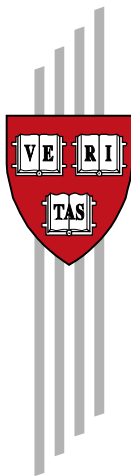
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This is how to think about and achieve public policy success

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Abstract

Officials working on public policies must answer questions like 'What does policy success mean?' and 'How should I pursue policy work in order to achieve success?' These are difficult questions, but there are ways to respond. One way draws on what I call the program logic of policy success, which suggests that: (i) Success requires efficiently meeting goals that stakeholders view as relevant, (ii) by doing work focused on impacting high-level objectives through programs that deliver promised time-sensitive outputs and outcomes according to a clear, logical plan. I believe this logic dominates the global public policy community, as 'the way' officials and organizations should think about and do policy work. This paper tests such belief, showing that officials do think in this way and that this thinking is influenced by common budgeting and evaluation mechanisms. I conclude by asking if this way of thinking poses any concerns, especially if it biases policy organizations to produce some kinds of policy success and not others.

A story from the field

One of my first jobs in government—over 25 years ago—involved devising a rural growth policy for an underserved area of my province. Inspired by the opportunity to 'help people', I was jolted when a mentor asked what I thought success would look like in the work. My answer was simple, "The people will be better off". As I remember, he inquired how I would describe a measure of such success if asked by the Ministry of Finance. I had no answer, unclear how to assess if people were living better lives in a short period; so I asked for advice. "Set a goal you can achieve in the next year and that will advance your high-level objective," I remember him saying. "Then identify how you will achieve the goal, showing how inputs will fund activities and deliver the necessary outputs and outcomes." I took his advice and prepared a work program that gained support and achieved its goals. As it turned out, my mentor's advice was not just personal wisdom, and his ideas are now reflected in many mechanisms organizations commonly employ for policy work. I have used such mechanisms to design, implement and monitor many goal-oriented policy programs in my career. More of these programs achieved their goals than didn't, but I don't know how many have really helped the people I was inspired to serve all those years ago.

Introduction

Drawing on Ola Abegunde (2015, p.25), I define public policy as the work government does through public officials and partners to solve society's problems and address its future needs. The number, scope and scale of societal problems and needs has expanded in many countries over recent decades, and governments have grown in response, absorbing more civic resources than ever before.[1] It matters, therefore, if today's public policies succeed: If they don't, current problems will go unsolved, future needs will be unmet, society's resources will be wasted, and governments may lose trust and legitimacy with citizens.

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[1] Andrews (2021, pp.4-5) shows that public policy work "accounted for 39 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the average country in 2020, having expanded from 24 percent in 1970" and that the "growing role of public policy reflects over a century of policy accumulation across the world."

What, however, does public policy success mean? And do public officials know how to structure policy work to achieve success? These are difficult questions to answer, but policy officials have developed ways to respond. One way offers what I call a program logic to think about and do policy work, where policy success involves achieving a set of time-defined goals through structured, logical work programs. As my story from the field explains, I learned to use this logic in designing and implementing policies early in my career and then watched policy organizations embed the logics in and through their policy work procedures.

I believe program logic is now dominant in the global public policy community. If this is true, we can expect policy officials to have program logic answers to questions about what success means and how to organize for such. If it is true, we should also ask if any program logic biases exist, leading governments and other policy entities to achieve some kinds of success and not others.

Before tackling the latter question, this paper aims to validate my belief, and show that program logic does indeed dominate policy work across the world, with governments and other policy organizations following such logic as a default when tackling policy challenges. It does so through three sections. The first explains what I mean by the 'program logic' approach—explaining the principles I learned to adopt as a young policy official and how these have become embedded in policy processes. A second section examines whether this logic dominates the way policy officials and organizations in the global public policy community do policy work, reporting on surveys of how these officials define and assess policy success and how budgeting and evaluation mechanisms in policy organizations influence such thinking. A third section concludes that program logics are indeed globally prominent and raises questions for future research; especially asking if program logics bias policy officials and organizations towards delivering narrow, short-term policy output and outcome success (and not towards effecting broader, long-run impact).

Making sense of public policy work and success

Public policy work is often prompted by the recognition of high-level social problems or future needs that require a collective response involving government. It is often difficult to develop and implement policy responses to these problems and needs, however, because solutions to big,

uncertain challenges are often unknown, subject to disagreement, and hard to fit into the rule-bound administrative processes and short and medium-term budget, project, and election cycles in which policy work takes place. Given these difficulties, officials responsible for designing and implementing policy responses can struggle to answer basic questions about their proposals, like 'what does public policy success mean?' and 'how should policy work be structured to achieve success?' In my experience, however, officials committed to developing policies that address high-level social problems or future needs must develop ways to answer such questions.[2]

My personal strategy to do policy work

As explained in my story from the field, I learned to answer these questions early in my career—by applying a specific way of thinking about and doing policy work. Inspired by a mentor's advice, this 'way of working' was based on five basic principles (or guiding norms).

First, I learned that policy work must focus on specific high-level social objectives. This may seem like a simple notion, but many policies focus on complying with administrative processes or controlling means (like finances) and not delivering objectives—or they allude only weakly to objectives (in vague aspirations like 'we plan to help people'). These other focal points do not mobilize the support or staying power needed to address challenging social problems or needs, and they do not effectively direct and drive such work. This support, staying power, direction, and drive only comes when work focuses on specific, significant high-level objectives.

I also learned to pursue challenging policy work in the right way, through a series of programs. Overly high-level, big-bang type work that promises to achieve objectives in one large policy initiative is unlikely to succeed, as demanding agendas are hard to deliver in the procedural and temporal boundaries that characterize most policy engagements. Low-level work that tackles large problems through multiple stand-alone projects is also unlikely to succeed, with results that are too small and uncoordinated (in and across time) to reach high-level objectives. What

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[2] My view reflects that of John Koskinen, former head of the United States Office of Management and Budget, who said, "any Federal manager" should be able to answer three questions: "What is your program or organization trying to achieve? How will its effectiveness be determined? How is it actually doing?" (McLaughlin and Jordan 1999, p.65).

one needs is a series of mid-level work programs, in which multiple project-level activities are combined in multi-component projects (or programs) to deliver more significant, impressive results than are possible through single projects, but in a way that fits the time and process constraints of most public policy systems.

I also learned to direct programs on goals, specified as measurable time-bound commitments. This requires clearly communicating what a policy initiative will achieve, using words like 'outputs', 'outcomes', and 'impacts'. Outputs are the things one produces or delivers most directly through policy work (like schools) and outcomes are the things one wishes to achieve with or through these deliverables (like improved enrollment rates). One can also communicate goals as 'what we aim to change' through outcomes (like education equity), but such impacts usually manifest after programs end and are seldom clearly attributable to policy work. Therefore, one should be careful about including them as goals to achieve in time-bound work.

I learned, further, that policy work is more likely to succeed if it follows a clear, logical plan. This lesson assumes that decision-makers are inclined to provide more support to proposals that explain clearly how public resources will be used to generate promised deliverables and goals (as in, 'your financial inputs will pay for these activities that will produce these outputs and yield these outcomes'). The lesson also assumes that clear, logical plans help one operationalize ideas, organize people to do required work, and inform a monitoring and control strategy to ensure policies are implemented in ways that facilitate the achievement of set targets. My experience suggests these assumptions hold; and clear, logical plans are a key to achieving promised goals.

Finally, I learned that programs are considered successful when others believe they are needed, and they produce promised results in an economic and timely manner. One can satisfy this belief by showing, first, that work is motivated by a specific, prioritized high-level objective; and its goals and processes are likely to help realize this objective. One must also demonstrate that the work delivers on its promises, reaching output and outcome milestones and goals. Finally, one must show that outputs and outcomes were delivered on budget and on time. I find that one can establish this kind of narrative by following the lessons offered here (given the focus on tackling high-level objectives by achieving related goals through a disciplined plan linking inputs, outputs, and outcomes, and allowing one to communicate if the work was done on budget and on time).
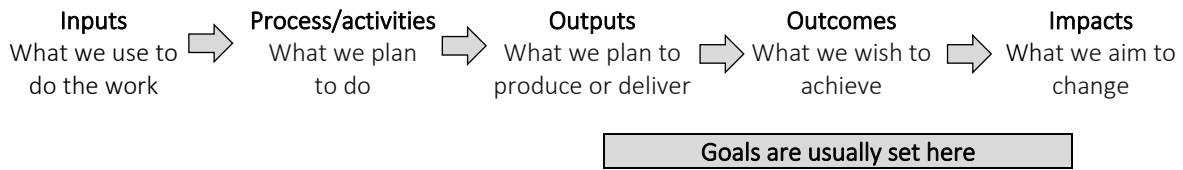
The policy community's strategy?

These lessons combined into a strategy that framed how I approached policy work for most of my early career as a practitioner. For a short period in the 1990s, I thought it was a personal strategy I alone knew (given assistance from my mentor, of course). I soon found that my strategy was built on ideas that others had been writing about for decades, however, and that these ideas were becoming commonplace in the global public policy field—manifested in tools that organizations were adopting and in a vocabulary of practice that many other policy officials were also using to make sense of, describe, and otherwise talk about their policy work.

I found, for instance, that program and performance-based budgeting studies already stressed the importance of focusing on high-level social objectives (Novick 1968). This literature also provided policy officials with programmatic budgeting tools, which Bradley (1968, pp.3-5) noted begin "with an effort to identify and define … objectives" and then allocate money to programs tackling such objectives. These studies also cemented the concept of the policy 'program' as a vehicle to use when combining activities or projects addressing the same high-level objective (Edvardsen 1995). Reflecting this, a 1995 study of program budgeting in New South Wales noted that program budgeting involved dividing health services into "programs [with] clear health-related objectives [based for example] on particular disease groups" (Viney et al 1995, p.29).

I also found that a vibrant academic and practitioner literature on project and policy planning emphasized the importance of targeting specific, measurable goals in policy work, and outlining the processes needed to achieve such goals (Kaufman 1988, Wolman 1981). These studies also introduced 'results chain' language to use in identifying goals, and tools like 'Logical Frameworks' (LogFrames) and (later) 'Theories of Change' to use when planning (Akroyd 1995, Bushnell 1990, McLaughlin and Jordan 1999, Nancholas 1998, Rush and Ogborne 1991, Van de Ven 1980, Wiggins and Shields 1995). These tools were used by all the policy organizations I worked in and with from the late 1990s onwards, with most policy officials routinely adopting the results chain language of inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impact in their work (shown in Figure 1).

Figure 1. The language of results chains

Inputs	Process/activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
What we use to do the work	What we plan to do	What we plan to produce or deliver	What we wish to achieve	What we aim to change

Goals are usually set here

Source: CDC (undated, b, pp.2-3), OECD (2020, p.12), Public Service Commission (2008).

This results chain language also influenced the public policy community's evaluation cluster, with many governments adopting LogFrame-influenced program evaluation methods in or after the 1990s (Cracknell 1994, Gasper 2000, Jackson 1993). These methods added to the language of program success as well, with concepts like relevance, effectiveness and efficiency introduced as evaluation criteria in many governments and policy organizations (OECD 1991, 1998, 2000, Sanderson 1996, Van der Knaap 2000). The concept of 'relevance' examines whether programs are needed and propose appropriate strategies. This can be judged by asking what high-level objective a policy addresses and if it follows an appropriate strategy to address such objective. 'Effectiveness' assesses whether programs achieve their goals and is gauged by asking if promised outputs and outcomes are produced and delivered. 'Efficiency' captures the cost and time taken to do policy work and is reflected in the ratio of outputs and outcomes to inputs. Such concepts have become integral to academic definitions of 'program' and 'programmatic' policy and project success (Bovens et al. 2002, McConnell 2010, and Shao et al. 2012) and are the concepts many modern evaluation tools assess to determine if policy work has been successful or not.

A dominant community logic?

In writing, it is clear that 'my strategy' for doing policy work was never mine; I was just channeling the zeitgeist of my community—and learning words and tools that others were also learning. These words and tools were being established as the means through which policy officials like me could think about and do policy work. Sociological new institutionalists might call these means an institutional logic—or combination of symbolic constructions and material

practices a community of individuals uses to organize and provide meaning to its world and work (Friedland and Alford 1991, p.284, Thornton and Ocasio 1999, p.804, Thornton et al. 2012).

The symbolic constructions and material practices in question include vocabulary, processes, and tools I have discussed, that inform what I call the 'program logic' of public policy success. This program logic gives policy officials the following answers to questions posed earlier, 'what does public policy success mean?' and 'how will policy work be structured to achieve success?':

- Public policy success is achieved by efficiently meeting goals stakeholders view as relevant.
- This requires work focused on impacting specific high-level objectives through programs that deliver promised time-sensitive outputs and outcomes according to a clear, logical plan.

As discussed, I see this logic supported by and embedded in the program and performance budgeting, planning, and evaluation mechanisms now common in governments, the language of results chains, logical frameworks and theories of change, and the way many policy organizations emphasize relevance, efficiency, and effectiveness when assessing policy success. It is the way of thinking that Compton and Hart (2019, p.5) describe as the "focus of 'classic' evaluation," centered on how a policy meets its "goals, the theory of change underpinning it, and the selection of the policy instruments it deploys—all culminating in judgements about the degree to which a policy achieves valuable social impacts" on high-level objectives.

This is not the only logic of public policy success, however. Other logics are evident across the literature and in practice, suggesting alternative answers to the questions about how to define policy success and organize for such. I draw examples from prominent studies on policy success, which suggest the importance of focusing on political, process, endurance, and distributional (or fairness) success when thinking about and doing policy work (Andrews et al. 2017, Bovens et al. 2002, Compton and Hart 2019, McConnell 2010, Newman and Head 2015). These studies do not use the word 'logic' to explain the different ways of thinking and doing implied by the various types of success, but they are similar. I offer simple versions here:[3]

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[3] These summary descriptions are simplified and draw ideas from multiple sources, that sometimes use similar terms to describe success but in marginally different ways. It is likely, therefore, that my descriptions do not align perfectly with any one of the referred sources.

- A political logic suggests that policies achieve success by yielding reputational and electoral gains to political patrons (with satisfied citizens) through work focused on mobilizing political support by promising (and delivering enough) visible, short-run, socially popular results.
- A process logic infers that policies achieve success when they expand legitimacy (and trust in government) through work focused on attracting support by following design, decision-making, and delivery processes that citizens and other stakeholders view as appropriate.
- An endurance logic offers that policies succeed when program, political, and process gains grow over time and catalyze streams of new gains (and innovation) through work focused on expanding policy functionality by building technical, political and organizational capabilities.
- A distributional (or fairness) logic infers that policies achieve success when stakeholders view processes and products as fair (promoting equity) given work focused on distributing gains and losses in just ways through inclusive processes and carefully targeted deliverables.

Some readers might argue that these logics can combine into one mega program-political-process-endurance-distributional logic that influences how policy officials make sense of and do policy work. I agree with the sentiment and intention: All these logics seem to matter and should be considered by all policy officials all the time. In practice, however, I have experienced the logics as distinct from each other, providing different ways of viewing and pursuing policy success and the work needed to achieve such. I believe the logics do not interact easily because they are encouraged and facilitated by different symbolic and material mechanisms, with different language and practice for each. The way success is assessed in the program logic (by measuring 'effectiveness' and 'efficiency') differs, for instance, from that in the political logic (where 'citizen satisfaction' and 'electoral success' matter) and the process logic (which might stress 'trust in government' as they key result) and the endurance logic (centered on concerns like 'sustainability' and 'innovation') and the distributional logic (which emphasizes 'equity').

Literature on institutional logics finds that communities and fields often have multiple logics at play, and that these logics compete to influence community members (Andrews 2013, Thornton and Ocasio 1999). In a recent study, for instance, Belair-Gagnon et al. (2020, p.301) describes two logics in news media organizations—an "experimental, audience-oriented, and efficiency-seeking logic" and a "journalistic logic prioritizing journalistic workflows, news formats, and

associated autonomy for news workers." The authors find that these logics are in competition, with the more embedded journalistic logic limiting change associated with the newer experimental logic. They reference Heinze and Weber (2016, p.1) in explaining this, noting that "incumbent logics" like the journalistic logic dominate other logics because they "are entrenched in organizational routines, status orders, policies, and structures that hamper change and trigger resistance" to the other logics. Given this explanation, I as a reader would expect most people in media organizations to behave in ways that reflect the embedded journalistic logic.[4]

I would similarly expect most public policy officials to behave according to the program logic of public policy work and success discussed in this paper, which I believe dominates other logics in the global public policy community. I base such belief on the view that the program logic is more embedded in the language and practice of the global policy community than other logics, such that policy officials are more influenced by program logic than others. Stated practically, I believe that most policy officials have had their views, incentives, capacities, interactions, words, and behaviors shaped by program logic mechanisms like program budgeting and evaluation processes, 'logical' planning tools, and results chain vocabularies. Given such influence, I argue that program logic now informs the default "regularized and predictable" way these policy officials think about and address policy challenges (Jackall 1988, p.112), providing the dominant script they use to describe policy success—as 'efficiently meeting goals that stakeholders consider relevant'—and to structure their work in the hope of achieving success—'in programs that deliver promised time-sensitive outputs and outcomes through clear, logical plans'.

Does program logic dominate the public policy community?

This is my own personal belief or hypothesis. It thus needs to be tested. I adopted a two-part strategy to conduct such test, aimed at capturing how policy officials think about and measure success and how their policy organizations' budgeting and evaluation mechanisms shape ideas

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[4] Even though some might be what Belair-Gagnon et al. call 'intrapreneurs' who use "opportunistic tactics to create and strengthen organizational free spaces aligned with the new [or alternative] logic, and then leverage the capacity that is developed to extend elements of the new logic into the broader organization" (Heinze and Weber 2016, p.1).

about success. My goal was to see if the program logic dominates how officials define success and if their organizations embed a program logic in the structure of public policy processes.

How do policy officials define policy success?

I conducted an informal online survey of 125 past students to gain a view into how active practitioners think about policy success. I focused on this relatively small, targeted group because I knew they occupied current roles as policy officials and had done so for at least five years (in their governments' Ministries of Planning or Finance, for instance, or in sector ministries like Education or Health, or in bilateral or multilateral development organizations working with governments). I asked one question in the survey: 'How do you define and assess public policy success in your current job?' In describing this question, I explained the aim of learning what each respondent and their organization did in practice and asked for details on criteria used to judge policy success (how they 'define' success) and tools and methods used to assess these criteria (how they 'evaluate' success).

In asking for one clear description, I hoped respondents would identify their organization's primary approach to assessing policy success (acknowledging that other, less prominent approaches probably exist) and to see if this approach reflected a dominant program logic.

I received 77 answers (a 62 percent response rate) from a varied set of officials.[5] These answers were all clear about how success was defined and evaluated. For instance, one official wrote, "We measure success as progress in completing activities written in our plans, measured as milestones and assessed by auditors." Another noted, "Public policy success is measured with reference to output and cost metrics, like number of companies/beneficiaries served and percentage of budget spent, that are monitored quarterly by budgetary agencies." Another explained, "Budget agencies monitor if targets are being reached and if money is spent as it was budgeted; less regular evaluation studies indicate that the outcome is felt on the ground."

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[5] There were 22 respondents from Africa, 17 from Europe, 16 from the United States, 8 from Latin America, 7 from Asia and 7 from the Middle East. Over half (53 percent) had 10 to 15 years of experience, 21 percent had over 15 years of experience, and 26 percent had 5 to 10 years of experience.

I analyzed the answers using manual word mining techniques aimed at identifying the most frequently used words and word clusters (to see how often program logic language was used in describing success). There were 1,823 words in total (an average of 24 per submission) but I removed many prior to determining which were most common: 'Public' and 'policy' accounted for 167 words, for instance, linking words like 'in', 'the', 'that', and 'are' contributed 824 words, and words relating to examples (such as 'number of companies/beneficiaries served') accounted for 356 words. There were 4 to 10 key words per answer after removing such words, with 486 in total.[6] I sorted these into categories, capturing whether they referred to success descriptions (231 words), assessment mechanisms (148 words), or assessment entities (107 words).[7]

The most common words used to describe policy success were 'goals' (25 words) and 'outcomes' (21) which feature prominently in the program logic lexicon alongside other frequently referenced words like 'outputs' (17), 'activities' (15), 'objectives' (14), 'impacts' (13), 'targets' (11), and 'milestones' (9). These logical framework and results chain words (see Figure 1) are often referenced in assessments of 'program effectiveness' (as discussed). They accounted for 54 percent of all the key words describing success. The next most referenced set of words (making up 17 percent of all the references) focused on cost and time efficiency (in terms like 'on-budget', 'on time', 'cost efficient', 'cost', 'time', and 'timely').[8] These words are also featured in the program logic vocabulary (used when evaluators assess program efficiency).

When combined, this program logic vocabulary accounted for 71 percent of all the key words policy officials used to define or describe policy success. The next most notable set of words related to things like 'citizen satisfaction' and 'political support' (12 percent), 'compliance' with laws and regulations (8 percent), 'sustainability' (5 percent), capacity growth (2 percent) and vague concepts like 'progress' and 'results' (2 percent). These words could count as referring to

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[6] For example, I took 4 words (progress, activities, milestones, and auditors) from the 19-word comment, "We measure success as progress in completing activities written in our plans, measured as milestones and assessed by auditors." In another example, I included 9 words (budget agencies, monitor, targets, as-budgeted, evaluation studies, and outcome) from the 30-word comment, "Budget agencies monitor if targets are being reached and if money is spent as it was budgeted; less regular evaluation studies indicate that the outcome is felt on the ground."

[7] Words like progress, activities, milestones, targets, as-budgeted, and outcome were classified as descriptors of success. Words like audit, monitor, and evaluation studies were categorized as assessment mechanisms. Words like auditors and budget agencies were classified as assessment entities.

[8] There were 39 such words in the key word population.

non-program logics—like political, process, and endurance logics. They only make up 29 percent of total references (at most), however, and are thus dominated by program logic references.

How do policy processes define success?

I captured policy officials' words about the processes and actors involved in assessing policy success; to identify the material practices and organizations shaping their definitions of success. The average response offered about three words to identify these processes and actors. These words referenced 'budgeting', 'planning', 'contracting', 'monitoring', 'reporting', 'auditing', and 'evaluation' processes conducted by 'budget entities', 'audit agencies', 'evaluation' bodies and external 'evaluators'. The most referenced processes and actors were 'budgets' and 'budget agencies' and 'evaluation' and 'evaluators'—with words related to each combining to comprise 83 percent and 87 percent of references to assessment mechanisms and entities.[9]

These findings are not surprising; budget and evaluation processes and actors often influence the way people think and behave. One does wonder how and why this budget and evaluation influence seems to favor a program logic of policy success, however: Do budget and evaluation systems in governments and policy organizations embed program logic language and practice?

I drew on various sources to engage this question, focusing primarily on evidence provided in the 2018 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Performance Budgeting Survey and the 2020 OECD review of evaluation practices. These two sources offer information of the way OECD and some non-OECD countries plan for, resource, and evaluate policy work (OECD 2018, 2020).[10] I accessed similar evidence on program and performance budgeting practices in 54 African countries in a 2013 survey by the Collaborative African Budget Reform Initiative (CABRI 2013) and by reviewing evaluation practices in four international development

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[9] A large share (39 percent) of the references to assessment mechanisms related to 'budget' processes (including reporting mechanisms), with a larger share (44 percent) identifying evaluation mechanisms as key. Similarly, 42 percent and 45 percent of terms used to identify assessment entities pointed to 'budget' and 'evaluation' bodies.
[10] The Performance Budgeting Survey provides data from 34 OECD countries while the review of evaluation practices covers 42 countries (35 of which were in the OECD). Both rely on data collected about country systems in 2019/19.

entities working across the world.[11] When considered together, these sources offered a view into the way budgeting and evaluation is done across a wide variety of countries. My aim was to see if this view revealed a common 'way' of doing budgeting and evaluation in these countries, and if that way fostered program logic more than other logics.

The first sign of a program logic comes through the way most countries' budgeting systems focus on high-level objectives and related goals (and the language they use in so doing). Survey results show, for instance, that governments in 82 percent of the 34 OECD countries have a national performance framework in place that 'spans all central government operations', and 79 percent of these countries use this framework to focus policies on 'clear national outcome goals'. Half of the countries also employ mechanisms to link sectoral 'output and outcome objectives' with these high-level national outcome goals, and Central Budget Authorities or other entities provide instructions on how to develop these sectoral objectives in over 80 percent of the governments. Further reinforcing the focus on high-level objectives as indicators of policy success, 64 percent of the countries produce annual reports 'on the achievement of national outcome goals'.

Program logic is also reflected in the processes countries use to allocate resources. Almost all OECD governments surveyed (88 percent) indicated having a performance budgeting framework in place to link budgets and objectives, with these frameworks entrenched in all countries' regulatory systems (mostly specified in organic budget laws or budget instructions). Most African countries also use such mechanisms, at least nominally, to allocate funds to programs focused on high-level objectives (with 65% of 54 African countries initiating—at least—a program or performance-based budgeting reform by 2013) (CABRI 2013, pp.23-27).

All these program and performance budgeting processes employ program logic language to describe resource allocations and link funds to objectives and goals. For instance, processes typically connect funds to 'inputs' (in 83 percent of African governments), 'activities' (in 75 percent of OECD countries), and 'outputs' and 'outcomes' (both captured by 71 percent of the

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[11] Including the African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), and World Bank (WB).

OECD governments).[12] There is much less frequent use of words associated with alternative logics when allocating resources:[13] Only 21 percent of OECD countries in the sample focus on 'citizen satisfaction' (suggesting a 'political logic') when describing public resource use; 7 percent include 'trust in government' indicators (related to 'process logic'); 11 and 18 percent link funds to 'innovation' or the uptake of 'e-government' (potential 'endurance logic' concerns); and 14 percent incorporate 'poverty and equity' measures (evincing a 'distributional' or 'fairness' logic).

We also see program logic words and practices embedded in the way policy work is evaluated in governments and other policy organizations. To start, most of the definitions OECD countries provided of 'policy evaluation' (in the survey on evaluation) identified 'programs' as the main type of policy intervention evaluated.[14] These countries also demonstrated a shared program logic terminology in their evaluations processes, with 97 percent evaluating 'outcomes', 93 percent evaluating 'outputs', 86 percent evaluating 'impacts', 83 percent evaluating 'inputs', and 79 percent evaluating 'process' (a term that often refers to 'activities'). The most common criteria for success mentioned in definitions of evaluation were also drawn from the program logic lexicon, with 'effectiveness', 'efficiency', 'relevance', and 'impact' standing out in the evaluations survey (OECD 2020, p.11). Results from the 2018 OECD performance budgeting survey suggest that 68, 62, and 68 percent of governments assess 'relevance', 'efficiency', and 'effectiveness' when evaluating policy success. These are program logic words and constructs.[15]

African countries also focus on program logic metrics (and constructs) when evaluating success, with 'effectiveness', 'timeliness', and 'cost efficiency' emphasized in 67, 58, and 42 percent of

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[12] The OECD performance-budget data referred to relates to the number of countries that have performance-based systems and answered positively when asked, 'What is the approximate overall percentage breakdown of the different types of performance information used in budget submissions,' to activities, outputs, and outcomes?

[13] The OECD performance-budget survey data referred to relates to the number of countries that have performance-based systems and answered positively when asked, 'To what extent are the following indicators, related to cross cutting or thematic objectives of government, reflected in the budget?' Citizen satisfaction, Trust in government, Innovation, E-government, and Poverty and Equity.

[14] A total of 27 of the 42 countries answering the OECD evaluation survey (OECD 2020) described having formal definitions of 'policy evaluation'. Fourteen of these definitions (52 percent) identified 'programs' as the type of public intervention the government evaluates.

[15] The OECD performance-budget survey data referred to relates to the number of countries that answered 'always' or 'usually' when asked, 'How frequently are the following elements included in the scope of evaluations?'_'Design of the programme, including relevance, choice of indicators, targets etc', 'Programme efficiency', and 'Programme effectiveness/impact'.

the African governments' program and performance budgets reviewed in the 2013 analysis (CABRI 2013, p.25). These are also the core metrics assessed in the world's largest international development organizations, responsible for financing policy interventions across the globe. For example, the World Bank evaluates success in the projects it funds by considering "the extent to which the project's major relevant objectives were achieved, or are expected to be achieved, efficiently," deriving an "outcome rating" by assessing "the relevance of objectives, efficacy in achieving each objective [where efficacy and effectiveness are similar], and efficiency" (World Bank 2017, p.39, see also World Bank 2021, p.84). The African, Asian, and Inter-American Development Banks calculate project success scores similarly, aggregating ratings for four core criteria—relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability (Asian Development Bank (ADB) 2016, p.28, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) 2019, African Development Bank (AfDB) 2021, p.5). The ADB weights all criteria equally, but the IDB gives effectiveness twice the weight of other criteria (essentially emphasizing the goal performance of policy work).

The commonness of relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency criteria point to a dominant program logic of policy success in policy organizations. Sustainability metrics used in the ADB, AfDB, and IDB suggest an alternative 'endurance' logic is also proving influential; but these metrics account for 25 percent of success scores (at most) in these three organizations, do not affect World Bank assessments, and are uncommon in governments (with only 4 out of 27 OECD countries referring to sustainability in defining evaluation (OECD 2020, p.11)). Other logics are also represented in development bank evaluations, including long-term impact (related to the 'endurance' logic), bank, borrower and implementation agency performance, and monitoring and evaluation quality (evincing a 'process' logic). These metrics are not, however, included in these organizations' project success scores, because they are not considered 'core' concerns.

The organizations' 'core' concerns are dominated by a program logic definition of success—as efficiently meeting goals stakeholders view as relevant (captured as relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency). Not coincidentally, these are also the concerns policy officials view as core (at least in my survey), supporting the idea that program logic dominates how policy officials think and do policy work and (or maybe because of) how policy organizations structure processes to foster the way policy officials think about and do policy work.

Conclusion

I started this paper raising questions that policy officials need to answer when doing their work: 'What does public policy success mean?' 'How should policy work be structured to achieve success?' I explained that I developed a way of responding to these questions early in my career, and saw that strategy emerge as an established 'program logic' for fellow policy workers to refer to when doing their work. According to such logic, public policy success is achieved by efficiently meeting goals that stakeholders view as relevant, where work focuses on impacting specific high-level objectives through programs that deliver promised time-sensitive outputs and outcomes according to a clear, logical plan. I argued that this program logic has become dominant in the global policy community, providing policy officials with a defining script for their work; or telling them, 'This is how to think about and achieve public policy success'.

Section two offered evidence that program logic is indeed dominant in the global policy community, even if other ways of thinking about policy success and work exist (promoting 'political', 'process', 'endurance', and 'distributional' definitions of success and ideas on achieving such). I analyzed a survey of policy officials across the world and found that they had similar program logic ideas on how to define policy success, used the same program logic language to describe these ideas, and pointed to the same program logic mechanisms and organizational actors when identifying how success was assessed. I also analyzed surveys of performance budgeting and policy evaluation in a variety of governments and development organizations and found that the mechanisms and language in use were very similar across very different contexts and routinely reflected the dominance of program logic.

I recognize that the survey of officials focused on a relatively small sample, and that the surveys of governments I reviewed centered on only some mechanisms and was heavily influenced by richer OECD countries. Some might suggest that these factors limit the view I have on policy work. I disagree. I believe that the smaller sample of officials is appropriate for this research; it is small because it is targeted, capturing the thoughts of practitioners I know work in the arena, and from a wide-enough variety of contexts. As a result, evidence derived from the survey is

sufficient to show that officials across regions as different as Africa, Europe, North America, and the Middle East use the same language to describe success, and assess success in similar ways. Additionally, I focused on budget and evaluation mechanisms because the officials named these as the key processes involved in defining and assessing policy success; and I reflect on practice that extends beyond OECD countries (also including evidence of how African country budget systems work, for instance, and how international development organizations evaluate policy engagements). This evidence demonstrates that the tools governments use to allocate resources to policy work and to determine if that work is successful are also similar, using the same language and metrics to frame and report on policy work and results.

Most notably, the language and mechanisms arising from my analysis of government systems echo the words and practices offered by policy officials. This points to a significant influence of program logic in the public policy community, and a dominant 'program logic' way of thinking about policy success and about doing policy work.

I do not think we would have identified such program logic dominance even twenty years ago. This logic—and the tools and language associated with it—were emergent at the time and being introduced in reforms across the world. I have written a lot about such efforts, in areas like external audit (Andrews 2001) and budgeting (Andrews and Turkewitz 2005, Ronsholt and Andrews 2005). Reforms in these and other areas were often introduced in response to what might now be called dysfunctional logics in policy processes or the dominance of pernicious versions of political and process logics (where policy success in many contexts seemed to center on only ensuring political patrons got re-elected or helping policy officials maintain bureaucratic compliance so as to never face any blame for policy failures). At the time, reforms aimed at introducing a program logic were seemingly thwarted by these stronger incumbent logics, and many interventions did little more than add weak logic layers—with thin program logics sitting on top of thick incumbent logics and being dominated by such (Andrews 2013). Andrews and Hill (2003, p.135) write about this in describing the state of performance-based budgeting (PBB) reforms in United States:

> "While most states are implementing PBB reforms, few show any evidence of direct
> behavioral changes resulting from such reforms—either in terms of the development of, or

response to, new performance-based incentives, or allocations that are linked to performance. The explanation offered is that PBB approaches are implemented in addition to traditional approaches, resulting in the traditional approaches dominating PBB."

The evidence discussed here suggests that PBB and other reforms are no longer mere additions to 'traditional approaches' and logics, and that the global policy community now thinks about and does policy work quite differently. It appears that a program logic now dominates this community, reflected in the way policy officials think and talk about policy success and work, in the processes and mechanisms commonly used to structure this work, and in what policy organizations require (in laws, regulations, and norms) from policy officials and their work. As Figure 2 shows, these ways of thinking, talking, structuring, and requiring interact to emphasize and reinforce the program logic we now see as dominant, which also reflects a slew of academic and professional influences that have arguably informed the adoption of a more program-oriented policy approach across the world over the last few decades. It may have taken time, but these elements now align to support a dominant program logic in the global policy community.

Figure 2. Essential elements of a community logic?
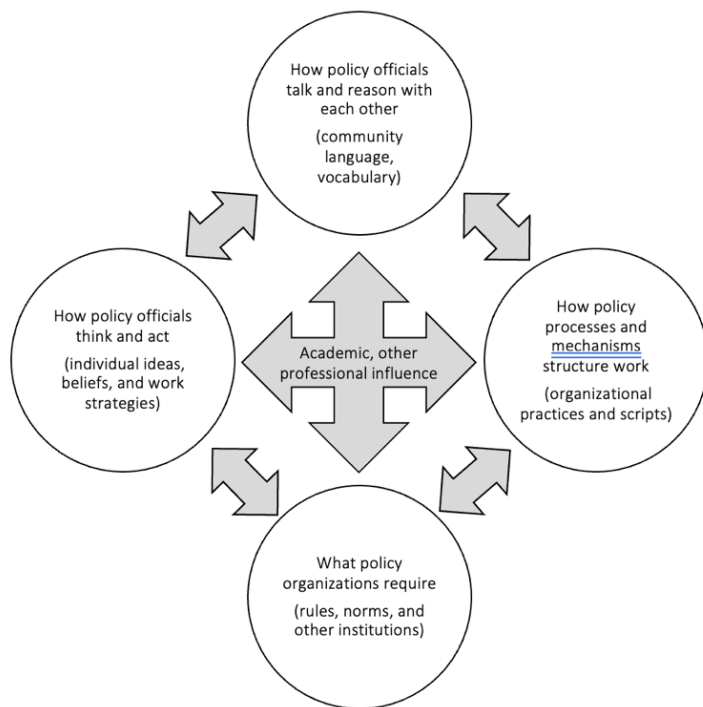
Source: Author's original work.

I see the dominance of program logic as positive, and the result of what many people have tried to effect through decades of program and performance-based reforms. The program logic helps policy officials and organizations to answer questions about how they identify what success means and how they will manage towards success. These answers evince a way of thinking that seems inherently legitimate and focused on achieving high-level objectives in sensible ways. The answers also seem practical and suited to the challenges and constraints of working in public organizations. The answers are also supported by, and even reflective of, modern processes that embed this way of thinking and doing in government organizations and systems. They can be called evidence-based, scientific, rational, and responsive to the problems and needs of society.

I also believe that the dominance of program logic raises questions for the global policy community, however. One line of questions asks if the logic has established ways of working that constrain flexibility and make policy organizations less nimble than they need to be to address complex challenges. This questioning is raised in active discussions—especially in the international development community—about the suitability of focusing on 'relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency' in policy evaluation,[16] and of using tools like the LogFrame and Theory of Change in policy design and management.[17] Such discussions tend to focus on tweaking the processes and mechanisms of structuring the work, while treating the core program logic as accepted or that might need marginal improvement but essentially offers the right answers to most concerns one might have about achieving policy success. As evidence, consider a 2017 exchange between Caroline Heider, then Director General of Evaluation at the World Bank Group and Hans Lundgren, then-Manager of the OECD/DAC Network on Development Evaluation (IEG 2017): In offering a critical reflection on established ways of evaluating projects, Heider notes, "These approaches [need] to become more dynamic, adopt methods that capture complexity and unintended effects [and] there is a need to assess the adaptiveness of project management"; Lundgren responds guardedly, suggesting caution in

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[16] See this discussion in IEG (2017).

[17] Consider discussions on theory of change and logical framework tools (https://tools4dev.org/resources/theory-of-change-vs-logical-framework-whats-the-difference-in-practice/), and on if programmatic tools can help to 'do development differently' (https://asiafoundation.org/2014/12/10/can-theories-of-change-help-us-do-development-differently/; https://www.ipat-interpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2015_10_12_Effective_Advising_How-Doing_Development_Differently.pdf).

suggesting change: "I am personally open to look again at the criteria and see how they can be refreshed. But before throwing the adolescent out with the bathwater – the criteria have been in place for fifteen years now and not a baby anymore – we should reflect on what we can build on and the fact that since they have such a wide-spread use many consider them useful in practical work"; Heider concurs, advocating improvement less than change: "True. It is not a matter of throwing the criteria out and starting all over. But, as evaluators we should take stock of how well they have worked and how they can be improved."

This kind of discussion raises a second line of questioning about the dominance of program logic: Is this logic fostering groupthink or even what one might call 'group-do' in the global public policy community—especially about what policy success involves and how success is achieved?

The term 'groupthink' depicts the way a desire for, or tendency towards, harmony or conformity in a group or community can foster premature consensus seeking and result in sub-optimal decisions or other outcomes (Janis 1982). It manifests where a group or community believes it has the answer to a problem, collectively rationalized as 'the way' of thinking or acting, and where this answer is not subject to the kind of analysis or critique needed for significant improvement. This is not a problem if 'the answer' that a community agrees on is sufficient not for the questions posed (or problems faced), but where 'the answer' has limits, one should expect that decisions and results will also be limited. Drawing on this perspective, I finish by asking if program logic has become so dominant in the global public policy community that it fosters such groupthink—and maybe even group-do (where 'the answer' defines policy thinking and action)—and if there are costs to this in terms of the decisions governments and other policy organizations make and the results they achieve? This question stems from the observation that program logic centers on the achievement of medium-term goals that can be defined and measured, subjected to a logical planning process where we know enough to identify the inputs needed and to link these to outputs and outcomes; and where relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency metrics capture success. What happens with policies in which success can only be assessed in the long run (like climate change)? Or where we lack the information to know the resources needed or the links between inputs and outputs and outcomes? Or where alternative logics define the success we really need (in concepts like 'citizen

satisfaction', 'trust in government' and 'equity')? Is program logic enough to think about and achieve public policy success in these situations?

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