

## *Let's talk about public projects*<sup>1</sup>

# Who defines public policies and policy programs?<sup>2</sup>

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## Introduction

In my previous article in PM World Journal (Gasik, 2023), I pointed out that the main stakeholders of public programs are the public and the government formed by the ruling groups. One of the most interesting and important issues in defining public policies, or reasons for creating and launching policy programs, is the institutional support for these activities. Institutions are the organizations and processes that define our ways of functioning in society (Ostrom, 2008). Do the institutions involved in policymaking function to ensure that policies and programs reflect the will of decision-makers and ensure that they stay in power, or solve public problems?

## Ruling Politicians

In the decision-making process, one entity must always be present: it is just the decision-maker. It may be a single ruler (a king, a president, the first secretary, or so), or a ruling group – a single party or coalition. The simplest decision-making process is just making decisions about implementing public policies or policy programs directly by that decision-maker.

With such solutions, the impact of knowledge on policymaking does not have to be significant. There is a high probability that the policies will be geared to the needs of the ruling group. The rulers have their own visions of how the state is to function in a given area. Recommendations from experts, usually ideologically close to those in power, are used informally. Experts who represent a different view of specific problems are ignored and sometimes persecuted. In this approach, those in power often skip the creation of public policies and directly decide on the implementation of major programs or projects themselves. Sometimes decisions are based on political ideologies professed by those in power. “We will use only our own resources in the

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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: This article is the fourth in a series related to the management of public programs and projects, those organized, financed and managed by governments and public officials. The author, Dr. Stanisław Gasik, is the author of the book “*Projects, Government, and Public Policy*”, recently published by CRC Press / Taylor and Francis Group. That book and these articles are based on Dr. Gasik's research into governmental project management around the world over the last decade. Stanisław is well-known and respected by PMWJ editors; we welcome and support his efforts to share knowledge that can help governments worldwide achieve their most important initiatives.

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economic development of our country.” “A huge international airport is to be built in our country.” “We will change the course of a great river to feed the desert regions of our country.” “We will invade a neighboring country so that we will become the largest power in our region.”

This method of determining policy directions meets the definition of an autocratic system.

## **Governmental Units**

The first type of institution supporting policymaking oriented toward public problems is the creation of policy analysis units in government structures. Of course, finally, the decisions are made by politicians, but they are supported by these teams. Such units work in many governments.

The Government Strategic Analysis Center (the word “strategy” is often used for such teams – strategy is one of the hierarchical levels of public policies) operates in the Lithuanian government (Lithuania Government, 2021). The Government Strategy Department works in the Finnish government (Finland Prime Minister’s Office, 2021). The Policy Planning Section works in Somalia (Government of Somalia, 2023).

Analytical units may also operate in individual departments (or ministries). For instance, in China, there is a Policy Planning Department within the government structures dealing with foreign policy issues (MoFA PRC, 2023). In the United States work, e.g., the Policy and Strategy Analysis Team, the US DoT (USA DoT, 2021), and in Ireland the Strategic Research and Analysis Division of the Department of Transport Ireland (Ireland DoT, 2021).

The inclusion of units of this type in the decision-making process makes huge progress in comparison with decision-making solely by governing entities (rulers or ruling parties).

In many democratic countries where the civil service is separated from the political layer, such teams fulfill their role well. But placing such units in the governmental structures carries the risk of biasing policies towards the needs of the government rather than the public. Aucoin (2012) observed the politicization of the state and the appropriation of its institutions by – even democratically elected – ruling political parties. This approach to governance is called New Political Governance (NPG). It may happen that the work of analytical teams will be used only to justify decisions taken by decision-makers or to develop their ideas, and not to solve real public problems.

## **External Experts**

A way to reduce the risk of focusing analyses on the ideas of governments instead of on the needs of society is to use the best experts in these analyses. But the best experts rarely want to work in government structures – this could be perceived as a loss of their independence. Moreover, solving many public problems requires the use of specialized knowledge only in relatively short periods of policy development and program definition. As a result, government structures are unable to generate all the

knowledge needed to make decisions on their own. Hence, structurally another way of supporting decision-making is the contracting of external, non-governmental expert teams or individual experts. They are charged with creating a solution proposal for a particular issue or problem for the government.

Such a method has long been used, for example, in the United Kingdom. Sir Michael Latham's team was set up to solve problems in the UK construction industry (Latham, 1994). The UK government has twice commissioned Mr. Gershon to analyze issues related to public procurement. As a result of the first of these reports (Gershon, 1999), among others, the Office of Government Commerce was established. Similar to this is the deliberative approach in which the solution to the policy problem is developed by a group of representatives of the community or society (often randomly selected). An example of a team set up to tackle a specific problem in Australia is a defense procurement review by a team led by Malcolm Kinnaird established in 2002 (Kinnaird, 2003). The effectiveness of project implementation in the Netherlands was dealt with by the Elverding commission (Elverding, 2008). The Dunlop Commission (1994) in the USA developed a report on worker-management relations (more about the American government reports you may find at

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Reports\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States\\_government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Reports_of_the_United_States_government)).

The independence of external experts increases the likelihood of obtaining an effective solution not oriented toward the current political preferences of the ruling party like it is in the above-mentioned New Political Governance.

Analyzing and solving public problems, i.e. defining public policies, can be outsourced to specialized consulting companies – not teams of experts. Such an approach carries the risk of putting the company's business ahead of the public good (Mazzucato and Collinson, 2023). This risk is lower in the case of individual external experts for whom the loss of their own good reputation as a result of proposing biased solutions is an important risk. Another risk identified by Mazzucato and Collinson is blocking the development of government analytical capabilities by hiring consulting firms. Perhaps this objection is correct in the case of economically and politically developed countries. But for developing countries, advisory support from external, foreign consulting companies is indispensable. By watching their work, these governments can significantly improve their own analytical capabilities and strengthen their development process.

## **Society**

In the institutions of defining public policies and policy programs described so far, it cannot be ruled out that the institutions involved will not work toward solving public problems. They may not be able to define them, or they may receive assignments that are inconsistent with societal needs. Yet another reason may be the implementation of the consulting companies' own business goals indicated above.

Decisions should address real problems, and the way they are resolved should take into account the preferences of the majority of the affected community. Therefore, they are included in the decision-making process. The two basic (but not the only) ways to include them are public consultations and referendums.

## Consultations

In most democratic countries, public consultations are part of the process of defining policies, including law-making. For instance, the ways in which public consultations are carried out in the associated countries are described in an OECD document (2022).

In Australia, as part of public consultations, stakeholders, among others, can suggest improvements to proposed public policies and also identify new ways to solve public problems, and help determine the impact of policies on communities (Australian Government, 2020).

In Botswana, the culture of consulting the most important decisions has survived from pre-colonial times (Obasi & Lekorwe, 2014). The organizational form at the village level is the “kgotla”, an assembly where issues important to the community are discussed. Kgotla is a communication tool, through intermediate administrative levels, between rural communities and the government. Among other things, this is where public policies are consulted. Governments also use the kgotla to identify major issues affecting local communities.

## Referendums

Consultations bring decision-makers closer to the desired shape of public policy or policy programs, but their results are subject to analysis and processing by policymakers. An even more socially oriented way of shaping them is by referendums in which communities directly make decisions on specific issues (usually if the number of voters reaches a certain level, for example, 50%). Public consultations and their results can only be treated formally as a mandatory step in policymaking and disregarded – this is practically impossible in the case of a referendum if this is of a binding type.

McLeod (2023) suggests considering making decisions on megaprojects through referendums in which both the purpose and cost of the project should be stated. For example: are you in favor of restructuring the country's transport system with the construction of a new intercontinental airport, which will cost about USD 50 billion?

One of the best-known referendums was on Brexit, i.e., leaving the European Union by the United Kingdom. The organization of the Winter Olympic Games in Krakow in 2022 was rejected in a referendum. The same happened with the proposal to connect the ski areas of Ötztal Glacier and the Sölden in Austria. The subject of the referendum in Bulgaria was, for example, the development of nuclear energy ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013\\_Bulgarian\\_nuclear\\_power\\_referendum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_Bulgarian_nuclear_power_referendum)). Although the majority of voters were in favor of developing nuclear energy, it was not binding for the authorities, as only 22% of eligible voters took part in it.

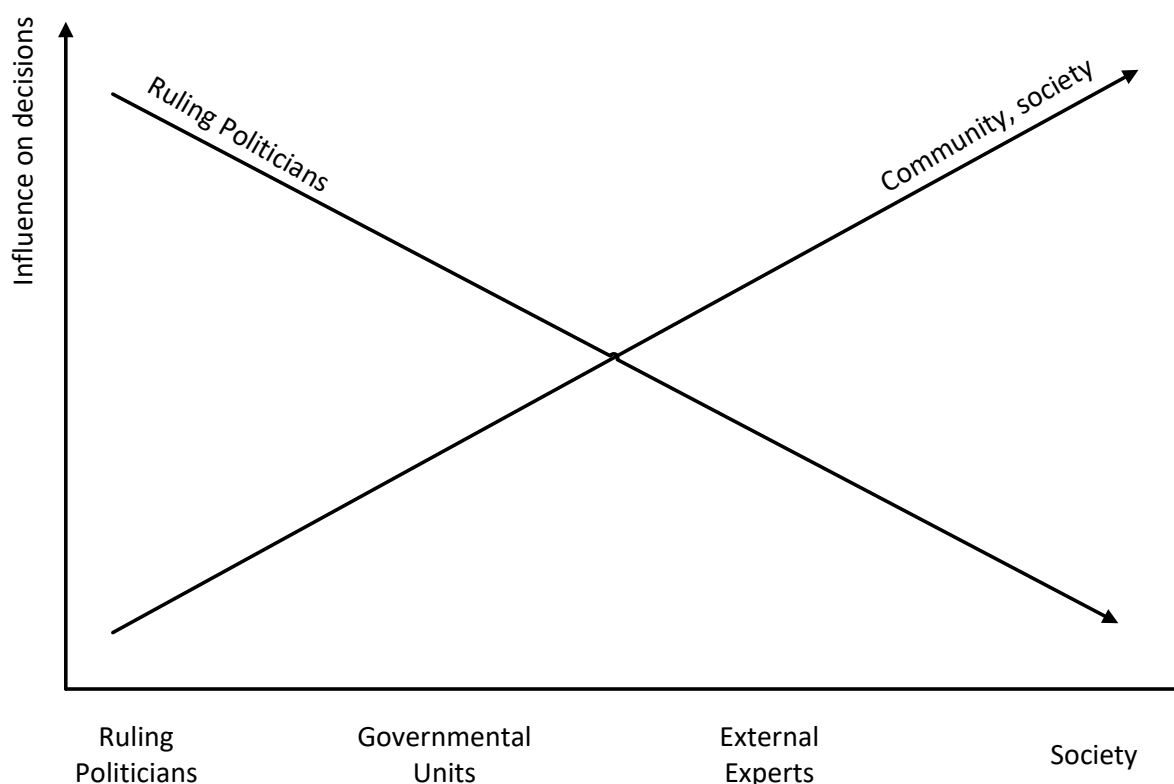
## Summary

The development phase of defining public policies, policy programs, and megaprojects is determined by the involvement of specific entities in them:

1. Ruling politicians,

2. Governmental units,
3. External experts,
4. Society.

Each next level of development contains the previous ones. Including government analytics units in the decision-making process, of course, does not eliminate the ruling politicians from the process. The knowledge of government analytical teams can be supplemented by the use of teams of external experts. And if this knowledge is not sufficient to make a plausible decision regarding the public policy or the implementation of a megaproject – it is advisable to address this problem with the appropriate community.



**Influence of politicians and society on policymaking**

In this way, the above set of development levels meets one of the main requirements for maturity models – each subsequent level contains practices from previous levels (e.g., Wendler, 2012). The most appropriate field of application of this maturity model is the transformation of autocratic systems into democratic ones. In developed democracies, practices from all these maturity levels are used in shaping public policies.

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