



Health Policy Document Analysis: Methodological Approach

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Abstract

Analysing policy documents is a critical process that necessitates a rigorous methodology to dissect and comprehend the intricacies of public policies. This process enables one to gain insight into the government's vision and approach to resolving societal issues. The primary objective of policy documents is twofold. Firstly, they guide and monitor policy implementation to attain the desired goals. Secondly, policy writers are sometimes responsible for developing the documents, while implementers receive them for execution. Thus, policy documents act as a communication channel between policymakers and implementors. This article presents a methodological approach to undertaking policy document analysis, explicitly focusing on systematic approaches to policy document analysis. Policy document analysis involves tracing the relationship between goals and means by constructing a goal tree with ultimate and intermediate goals designed to achieve policy goals. This approach elucidates how policy issues and agendas are addressed in the policy document. The study recommends utilising content analysis to examine policy documents and determine whether they address the intended policy issue. The paper further proposes six variables to be examined while analysing policy documents, including policy background, policy problem, policy goal/objective, policy outcome, policy stakeholders, and the strategy for policy implementation. Employing appropriate methods in policy document analysis contributes to exploring the underlying facts about the document, resulting in valuable insights into policy formulation and its outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Policy analysis is a rigorous and systematic approach to evaluating public policies to comprehend their effectiveness, efficiency, and overall impact on society. The process involves utilizing various methodologies and data to provide evidence-based recommendations to policymakers. Policy analysis typically focuses on three main areas: policy development, implementation, and evaluation. Health policy analysis has gained considerable attention in published literature, particularly in low and middle-income countries (Gilson & Raphaely, 2008). However, it is not easy to find studies that apply policy document analysis, particularly regarding health policies in Sub-Saharan countries. A study by Gilson and Raphaely (2008) found that most articles focus more on an earlier stage of policy development, presenting a broad description of national-level experience rather than on implementation. Few articles address the implementation experience or the views of implementing actors, while some focus on general implementation experiences in various policy areas, including advocacy. Policy analysis is often viewed as technical work that underpins the development of new policies or the evaluating of existing ones.

For example, epidemiologists identify health policy analysis as risk factors for diseases, critical targets for health interventions, or cost-effectiveness analysis that identifies possible interventions to address a health problem. Nevertheless, the political and organizational approaches to policy analysis view policy as the process of decision-making rather than focusing solely on the policy as the output of that process (Buse, Mays & Walt, 2005). Technical analysts typically conceive the policy process as comprising several stages, such as prioritizing policy action, identifying the problem, analyzing the possible causes of existing problems, identifying possible interventions, selecting the best intervention among others, implementation, and policy evaluation (Schofield, 2001; Gay et al., 2012; Gilson & Raphaely, 2008). Buse et al. (2005) propose an analytical framework for policy analysis that encompasses three interrelated factors: the context within which policy has been made, the process by which policy has been developed and implemented, and the actors who influence the policymaking process.

The policy context portrays the historical and existing environment in which the policymaking process occurs. This environment has different factors that may influence local, national, and international policymaking. Additionally, the policy process concerns how an issue or problem is placed on the policy agenda. According to Walt et al. (2008), this process may be conceptualized in four categories: problem identification, policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Lastly, the analysis is concerned with the role of policy actors and how they are influenced by policy content and process. Policy actors are categorized into two categories: international and national. International actors include multilateral and bilateral donor agencies and international NGOs. National actors include politicians, ministries, civil servants, bureaucrats, technical advisers, parastatal organizations, non-governmental actors, religious groups, trade unions, local charities, academic institutions, mass media, pressure or interest groups, and private sectors. The analysis is either conducted retrospectively, looking back at why and how the policy finds its way into the agenda, content, and whether it achieves its goal, or

prospectively looking at how policy might be introduced and accepted by other actors who will be affected by the policy (Buse et al., 2005).

Policy document analysis is crucial as it provides a methodological approach to dissecting and comprehending the essence of public policies. Policy documents, such as legislative acts, guidelines, strategic plans, by-laws, executive orders, and official reports, are authoritative sources that outline public policy objectives, strategies, and expected outcomes. Analysing these documents helps stakeholders understand the government's vision and approach to addressing societal issues. Policy analysis assists in understanding how policies are framed, influenced, and implemented, making it an essential tool for assessing governance practices. It highlights the need to invest in policy document analysis (Anasel, 2017).

2. Policy Documents Analysis

Policy documents are crucial to the policy process, as they outline the core quality of a policy as conceived and expressed by the policy actor. However, policy documents may not always reflect the true intentions of the policy actor and may have other purposes, such as satisfying donors, pacifying political adversaries, or concealing true intentions. Policy document analysis facilitates the identification of policy principles, including the engagement of different policy actors and the clarity of policy goals.

Policy documents serve two primary purposes: to guide policy implementation to fulfil its goals, monitor progress, ensure that the implementation process remains on track, and serve as a means of communication between policymakers and implementors. Policy implementers must clearly understand the policy document to implement it effectively and may need additional background information on its intentions and objectives. Despite the importance of policy documents, a study by Gilson and Raphaely (2008) on policy analysis reviewed 164 articles published between 1994 and 2007, with the majority focusing on policy development, and only a few articles were found to address policy implementation experiences. The literature indicates a need for more studies that apply policy document analysis to policy implementation. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by providing a methodological approach to policy document analysis. Specifically, it provides a rigorous and systematic approach to analysing policy documents to guide policy implementation and meet policy goals.

3. Methodological Approach

3.1 General Overview

Even though there are different approaches to extracting data from documents, most policy analysts usually rely on content analysis (Buse et al., 2005). Content analysis is one of the research methods used to analyse text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Text data might be verbal, print, or electronic, obtained from narrative responses, open-ended survey questions, interviews, focus groups, observations, or print media such as articles, books, or manuals (Masue et al., 2013; Anasel et al., 2019; Anasel & Swai, 2021; Anasel & Swai, 2023). The focus of the policy

document analysis is to trace the goal-means relations by constructing a goal tree with ultimate goals, intermediate goals and means to achieve the goals (Andries, 1990; Petek *et al.*, 2022) to elucidate how the policy issues and agenda are addressed in the policy document.

Numerous models have been formulated to analyse policy. However, there has yet to be a single model that best suits policy document analysis (Walt *et al.*, 2008; Cheung *et al.*, 2010). This study borrows an idea formulated by Rütten, Abu-Omar, Gelius and Schow (2013) and Cheung, Mirzaei and Leeder (2010) on policy document analysis. It proposes a methodological approach to analyse the policy document. Rütten *et al.* (2013), Cheung, Mirzaei and Leeder (2010), and Cardno (2018) espouse the logic of the event model and develop the framework for health policy analysis focusing on policy formulation and implementation. Acknowledging policy formulation and implementation creates room to suit policy document analysis (Cheung *et al.*, 2010). The criteria formulated provide an understanding and convincing connection between policy determinants and policy outcomes and have been validated as a valuable tool in policy document analysis. The concepts proposed by this study in analysing policy documents are policy background, existing problems, policy goals, monitoring and evaluation, public opportunities and obligation. These concepts are explained in the sections below and pave the way for developing the variables for analysing policy documents in Table 1.

3.2 Policy Background

Policy background encompasses considering scientific results as the ground for policy formulation that starts to feature from its name and the organ that publishes the policy if its core functions align with the policy objectives and goals (Rütten *et al.*, 2003; Cardno, 2018). Specifically, the sources may be of different types, such as authority (e.g., persons, books, articles), quantitative or qualitative analysis, or study on the area addressed by the policy and program (Cheung *et al.*, 2010). Cardno (2018) added that the background should show the aim of producing the policy document, where it was produced, who was involved in its development and when. Knowing who was involved in policy development allows the analysts to examine whether their positions have influenced how the policy has been written and produces biases. Therefore, this study concludes that policy background is vital to be considered during the policy analysis to ascertain the influence of sub-variables of the background on the policy document.

3.3 Problem

In this area, the analyst is supposed to ascertain whether the policy stipulates the problem to be addressed. The problem could be more desirable according to people or interest groups (Birkland, 2010). Depending on their event, interest groups can impede or promote the policy formulation and its outcomes (Fleming, 2010). Interest groups determine which issues get into the political agenda that responds to a policy problem and influence policymaking (Bonafont, 2016; Christensen, 2021; Murphy, 2023). It involves assessing if the policy's purpose was achieved by addressing the problem, the policy drivers or other forces behind it, and whether the policy values underpin and guide the policy linked to local or national strategy (Cardno, 2018). Analysing how

the problem has been stipulated in the policy is one variable to consider when analysing policy documents. Whether the policy document has addressed the intended problem is critical as it directly influences the policy outcome.

3.4 Goals

Under this, we ascertain whether the document provides precise, structured objectives and goals to create mechanisms that direct the policy towards achieving the final goal. Goals should demonstrate consistency externally and internally on what is desired and how to realise the same. External consistency refers to observations made in other situations that support the policy proposal, whereas internal consistency refers to inferences logically drawn from the available information (Belfiore & Bennett, 2007). Moreover, the structure of the goals should address the policy problem and be evaluated qualitatively and quantitatively where possible. The policy structure and the text should provide evidence of its construction or development, which provides procedures and guidance for practice. This study acknowledges setting policy goals as a key to policy implementation. Policies are likely to have ambitious goals that cannot be achieved and, therefore, influence the implementation of policy documents (Boeuf et al., 2016). Therefore, what the policy is intended to achieve and the mechanisms to achieve the same are two of the critical issues to be considered when conducting policy document analysis, as clarified in Table 1.

3.5 Monitoring and Evaluation

Apart from the policy implementer, another actor collects information on the policy implementation process and outcomes. It goes together with data collected before, during and after the policy implementation. It is done by identifying the organ to perform the evaluation and outcome of measurements that have already been explicitly and implicitly identified for each objective and goal (Anasel, 2017). The policy document is expected to show how and when the policy will be evaluated and reviewed. The monitoring and evaluation component in the policy document is critical in guiding the monitoring and evaluation of the policy to understand and establish whether the policy implementation is on track and provide lessons for intervention (Mugo, 2014). Monitoring and evaluation are in line with the identification of an organ to conduct the evaluation and the identification of the outcomes, as clarified in Table 1.

3.6 Public Opportunities

The policy explains clearly the stakeholders that will be involved during its implementation. The policy will obtain long-term support by acknowledging the concerns of different stakeholders involved in its implementation. One of the links between objective and goal setting and successful implementation is the development of explicit means to realise the stated goals. The goals are achieved through a precise specification of the obligations of various policy implementers (Buse et al., 2005). The policy document should include the specific roles of the

policy implementers to indicate who will do what during the implementation, as clarified in Table 1.

Table 1: Proposed variables to be used in analysing policy document	
A: Policy Background	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Naming 2. The scientific ground for formulation 3. The source of policy and program 	
B: An existing problem that needs policy	
1. What is the problem(s) stated in policy documents	
C: Policy goal(s), objectives and means	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Policy goal(s) 2. Policy Objectives 3. What they want to achieve 4. How it will be achieved 5. The goals can be evaluated later (quantitatively where possible and qualitatively where not possible) 6. The action is addressing the specific issue/problem 	
D: Outcome Assessment	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The policy indicates monitoring and evaluation mechanism 2. The policy nominated a committee or independent body to perform the evaluation 3. The outcome of the measure is identified for each of the explicit and implicit objectives 4. Criteria for evaluation are stated 	
E: Which stakeholder involved (Public Opportunities)	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stakeholders involved both during the formulation and implementation phase 2. The primary concerns of stakeholders recognised and acknowledged to obtain long-term support 	
F: Strategy for implementation (Obligations)	
1. The obligations of the various implementers are specified - who must do what?	

Source: Literature Review

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The literature review has identified several variables critical to policy document analysis in the context of developing and middle-income countries, as summarised in Table 1. Policy formulation is influenced by various factors, including the actors, interest groups, and context. While policy documents may not always address the existing problem, as Cheung, Mirzaei and Leeder (2010) clarified, they may serve other purposes, such as satisfying donors and funders or pacifying the political situation (Barrett & Tsui, 1999). Therefore, it is essential to analyse the policy goal and its mechanisms. A good policy document should clearly state the policy's implementers and their powers over the implementation of the policy. Analysing policy documents plays a crucial role in comprehending the intricacies of public policies, enabling stakeholders to make informed decisions based on evidence and facts.

The study recommends utilising content analysis as a research method to analyse policy documents. Content analysis primarily examines textual data, including verbal and narrative responses from open-ended questions (Masue et al., 2013; Anasel et al., 2019; Anasel & Swai, 2021). Therefore, content analysis is a viable and suitable method to analyse policy documents and reconstruct whether the policy addresses the intended goal (Andries, 1990; Rochford et al., 2022).

The study has proposed six variables to be examined while analysing policy documents, including policy background, policy problem, policy goal/objective, policy outcome, policy stakeholders, and the strategy for policy implementation. By systematically analysing policy documents, policymakers, researchers, and citizens can gain valuable insights into policy formulation and its anticipated outcomes. Addressing complex societal challenges requires policy document analysis to remain an indispensable tool in promoting transparent, inclusive, and effective policymaking for the betterment of society.

5 Limitations and the Future Study

The study examined the methodology commonly used for policy document analysis. The paper focuses on health-related policy documents in developing and middle-income countries. However, the proposed methodology can be applied to policy document analysis of other sectors in a different context. Further studies can be conducted to apply the findings to the real policy document analysis and examine the six variables proposed in this study. The READ approach can be combined with content analysis to analyse the policy document step by step to explore the facts about it and gain insights into policy formulation and its outcomes.

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