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## hat Is a Policy, and What Is a Government Program? A Simple Question with No Clear Answer, until Now

### Antonio Lassance

Researcher at the Brazilian Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea). Political Scientist (Ph.D. – Institute of Political Science, University of Brasilia, Brazil). Professor at Ipea's Master in Public Policy and Development, and at the Brazilian National School of Public Administration (Enap)

**Abstract:** The difficulty of defining and distinguishing what is a public policy and what is a government program is a crucial problem with practical and important consequences for the design, efficiency, and effectiveness of policies and programs. However, public servants are taught to live in this Babel without paying much attention to it. The article extracts this evidence from a methodology that combined a qualitative experiment and in-depth interviews with more than 350 Brazilian Federal Government employees, over the past five years. The article proposes a new approach to the design of policies and programs as a basic criterion for *ex-ante* analysis to contribute to making such latent inconsistencies even more glaring and evident and to overcome the most common failures, as soon and as easily as possible, before programs take their first step.

**Keywords:** *Ex-ante* Policy Analysis. Program Theory. Policy Design. Program Evaluation. JEL codes: H11, D04.

### A manufacturing defect waiting for a recall

A specter haunts public administration: the difficulty of defining and distinguishing what is a policy and what is a government program<sup>1</sup>. The problem has practical consequences for the design of policies and programs but, contradictorily, it is so common

and chronic that it is treated as an irrelevant and deliberately neglected issue by policymakers. The proverb whispering that “there is no problem if there is no solution” rides again, but in fact, it is a kind of manufacturing defect waiting for a recall. Accidents are waiting.

Over the past five years, I have tried to understand this problem in depth by interacting with hundreds of government officials, managers, analysts and advisers, from the most different areas and careers of the public service, civil and military. As a researcher at the Brazilian Institute for Applied Economic Research (Ipea), I interviewed those policymakers in workshops, seminars, as an observer or meeting moderator<sup>2</sup>. These interviews sought to analyze how policies and programs emerged and were designed.

I also developed a very simple experiment in several courses, such as Public Policy Analysis; Program Evaluation; Strategic Planning; Actor Mapping and Agenda Tracking; Governance and Management, to assess the easiness or the difficulty of each one of these public servants in identifying and distinguishing a policy from a program.

The exercise consisted straightforward of asking each public servant to choose a policy or program to be analyzed throughout the course and to begin by saying what policy issue the case was referring to. Course students often used to expose their doubts asking questions like: “Can I consider this case as a policy or a program?”

It was common also receiving responses that scrambled policies, programs, and public policy instruments together. The same case was sometimes referred to as a policy, sometimes as a program by policymakers equally involved in their implementation. Those mistakes came from people from the most diverse backgrounds – veterans or newcomers in the public service; of the board or commissioned staff – some of whom have been in charge of decision making, coordination, or advisory staff.

Some of the interviewed suggested cases that were not even institutionalized. Some guessed policies were abstractions sprouting from a need felt by the respondent, comparable to fictional characters looking for a plot. “This policy doesn’t exist, but it should!” – as one of the interviewed persons has answered.

It was possible to understand, with interviews and the experiment in course exercises, that public servants were taught to live in a Babel, without paying too much attention to it. Instead, they reproduce it continuously.

A classic example of this Babel is that one of the oldest and most famous “definitions” of what a policy is, in fact, is an empty concept, a deliberate undefinition. In a play on words that said everything without clarifying anything, Thomas Dye stated that “public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do” (Dye, 1972: 2).

Dye confesses that his book frankly “discourages elaborate academic discussions of the definition of public policy – we say simply that public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do” (Dye, 1972: 13). He also stated that policies and programs should be taken as synonyms, with mere differences in scale. Despite that, to this day, many of the handbooks that “explain” what policies are not only reprise the concept offered by Dye but consider it one of the best, simplest, and most well-targeted of all (Peters and Zittoun, 2016.; Howlett and Cashore, 2014; Cairney, 2012).

However, the low assertiveness to define distinctions and to sew the relationship between policies and programs, in a structured and better-equipped way, goes beyond conceptual inconsistency. It is common for many policies and government programs to emerge as described by the “garbage can model” (March and Olsen, 1972), that is, solutions in search of a problem, and not policies and programs in which problems guide the building of solutions.

The garbage can model has become a standard not exactly with this uninviting gift

packaging but under the euphemism of “best practices”.

Although “best practices” are very rich and inspiring examples, they bring with them some typical problems. One of them is their lack of systematization. Many of its records are focused on achievements, not on the policy formulation, design, planning, and implementation process. These achievements gain fame based on news, fragmented reports, and the exchange of *in loco* experiences.

Solutions based on supposed “best practices” are options assumed by decision-makers and managers with a serious selection bias. Experiences that have had good results in one state or municipality do not necessarily serve another if the problems and the context variables are very different. They are offered as shelf products from international “models”, but socioeconomic and political-institutional differences are abysmal. To begin with, the long-term financing capacity of these solutions is very different.

“Best practices” are prototyped one-fits-all solutions, “prêt-à-porter” style, and not programs that have been properly tested and evaluated. They are partial responses that are far from being integrated solutions. They are focused on short-term successful novelties and peculiar experiences that are not related to different cases, even when the same problems are under different circumstances and have distinct causes.

Anyway, to incorporate “best practices” novelties, the usual solution is to create more costs of governance and management structures and to demand more budget, thus opening the range of “best practices” to be hired from the shelves.

“Best practices” are piling up and stimulating overlaps, contradictions, and such a widespread of the supposed solutions that make the programs much more fragmented than they already were. Worse, they create a range of projects and activities disconnected

from the central problems, which means, unplugged from policies.

The image of the patchwork is recurrent in the reports both of those who formulate policies and those who implement government programs. They both complain about high coordination costs, uncertainties, ambiguities, and clashing of jurisdictions, either between different agencies or within units of the same agency.

In the end, the solution becomes part of the problem and the Babel is now reverberating through a maze of programs, agencies, management units, administration requirements, regulations, unmet needs, and frustrations.

### How to get out of the impasse?

The appropriate option to overcome this situation is, according to the essential recommendation of Carol Weiss, the use of “the methods of research to make the judging process more systematic and accurate” (Weiss, 1988: 4). This ballast is necessary to induce evidence-based policies, supported by theory, and adhering to transparent criteria that make sense.

The issue is a little more complex when it is found that robust alternatives demand policymakers to be able to deal with the policy issues in a more structured and well-equipped manner, in their theoretical, methodological, and technical tools.

A stable bureaucracy qualified in *ex-ante* analysis<sup>3</sup> and policy design, attentive to the principles of equity, transparency, responsiveness, and also supported by a more refined and purposeful relationship with the internal and external control systems (when they are aligned in the same direction), would favor rationality that would serve as a kind of checks and balances, with some virtuous resistance to the vicious circle of shelf “solutions” ordered and sold as elixirs.

Even more challenging is to make the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats

minimally assertive. The secular Weberian dilemma (Weber, 1999) between the ethics of conviction and the ethics of responsibility, redesigned as that of a “government of strangers” (Hecló, 1977), remains intact and important (Carpenter, 2001; Maranto, 2005). While politicians are the guardians of policy beliefs, bureaucrats are guardians of policy responsibility. They live separate worlds, with different grammar, timing, and emergencies.

How to overcome the impasse? With science-based references also friendly formulated to design policies and programs that make sense to policymakers. With the use of strategic planning as a process of dialogue, bargain, and transparency between organizations and the public, and not mere bureaucratic programming. Overcome the impasse involves targeting objectives more directly related to the public. There are policies and programs that even today assume that their deliveries refer to things, not to people.

These requirements may be of interest to politicians, bureaucrats, and certainly the public. Besides, it can show who does not have or does not survive such advances, as better-defined goals and more accurate goals to deliver products, results, and impacts.

### **What policy and government programs are? Theory answers**

Any theory is an explanation of the evolving behavior of a problem. In addition to explaining the past, a theory assumes an expectation of feasible results to be anticipated in similar circumstances.

Theory is essential to find an explanation about public policy problems. Even more to find better-adjusted solutions. This possibility is only effectively accomplished at the level of programs and, more precisely, in actions and projects – therefore, at management (at the tactical-operational level).

It is assumed that, under certain circumstances and through a logical sequencing of inputs and processes, it is possible to estimate product targets, results, and impacts that make the policy objectives viable. The circuit that opens with the strategy only closes with long-term impacts. This is called a *program theory*.

The genesis of this approach draws on improved theories, methodologies, and techniques in a learning process that goes back, among others, to the application of systems theory to politics (Easton, 1953), the accumulation of knowledge acquired by the epistemic community in evaluation (Vedung, 1997, Weiss, 1998), the Objectives-Oriented Project Planning (Ziel-Orientierte Projekt Planung – ZOPP), the situational strategic planning – PES (Matus, 2007), and the use of logical models (Cassiolato e Guerese, 2015; Newcomer, Hatry, and Wholey, 2015; Weiss, 1998).

Thereafter, the use of program theory in policy design was consolidated among this community of experts in evaluation (Weiss, 1998; Vedung, 1997; Cassiolato and Guerese, 2015; Newcomer, Hatry and Wholey, 2015; Ferreira, Cassiolato, and Gonzalez, 2015; Brasil, 2018).

Like any other theory, it is assumed that a program theory is based on a formulation and method of analysis based on evidence submitted to public scrutiny, with the support of a community of experts from within and outside governments.

When using such a reference, one takes advantage of the expertise developed by several areas of analysis and evaluation. Most importantly, the commitment is such that policies and programs are born with transparency, and to be systematically monitored and evaluated (Garcia, 2015; Cardoso, 2015).

Despite the origin and common use of this tool, one of the challenges is to break the divorce that occurred between the fields of *ex-ante* analysis, *ex-post* evaluation, and strategic

planning, except among multidisciplinary teams that work together (as in Ipea<sup>4</sup>).

The basis of the design is the precise identification of a central public policy problem and the problems that are its root causes. While this finding is relatively trivial, doing so is not a simple matter. The integration of approaches is crucial.

The difficulty in identifying a central problem and the public directly associated with it is the key to the “manufacturing defect.” of policies and programs. When this elementary definition is neglected, amateurism or off-the-shelf solutions present themselves as bad substitutes.

The basis for defining a central problem is the explanation of its logic and the stylization of its causes and consequences. This problem is explained by causes that are obviously prior to it and implies consequences that would not exist if it was not, in fact, a central problem.

As Matus points out, the explanatory moment is not a mere diagnosis (Matus, 2007; Matus, 1993; Matus, 1989). It is a logical exercise that reveals not only features (a list) but the cause-consequence chain of a problem.

A public policy is born from the confrontation between the logic of a deciphered problem and the deliberate purpose of a planning actor who has the capacity and authority to act on that problem.

Strategic definitions elect problems and make treatment choices (“bets”) on a hierarchical set of causes (Matus, 2007; De Toni, Salerno e Bertini, 2008). When attacked at these critical points, the central problem will undergo changes, being mitigated or overcome in its harmful consequences. In this case, the program theory is correct. If it didn’t, either the theory is wrong or the program was not implemented correctly.

### **At long last, a theoretically grounded concept**

With such a theoretical-methodological apparatus, it is possible to build up a clearer

distinction between policies and programs. Policy can then be conceptualized as:

An institutionalized proposal to solve a central problem, guided by a conception.

We can call this conception a theory when it is based on a logical explanation; when it can link explanatory causes and their consequences. Program theory explains the reason for a central problem and answers what kind of solution will change it.

To state that the solution has to be institutionalized is more accurate than saying that policy is something that a government chooses to do or not to do. Policy is established before doing. It precedes the action. Policy is born as a rule, first of all as a conception that will shape the rules that will define a plan and a course of action. Policy is born *ex-ante*.

Institutionalization is an essential concept for the definition of policy also because this process pervades different jurisdictions (as the Legislative and the Judicial one). After all, institutionalizing policy requires (in democracies, obviously) legislative approval and judicial acquiescence regarding policy and program rules.

Defined from a strategy, that is, through the choice of crucial problems to be tackled simultaneously or according to a hierarchy, policies are implemented through programs.

Program is, precisely:

The given solution to each of the causal problems that explains a central problem in policy and which were deemed crucial by a strategy designed to surround, to face, and to overcome it.

One policy is usually implemented by more than one program. After all, some causes run in their own lanes and need to be worked in parallel with other ones. Public policy problems are generally complex and multi-causal. They



are hardly standalone causes of problems that can be solved in a serial way<sup>5</sup>.

Then, there are no policies without programs and vice versa, but the understanding of the relationship that several programs have with the same central problem is the key to the design of integrated policies. They can only be integrated if they are linked by the programs.

Policy is the macro environment of the solution. It is where a broader vision is required, which aims at effectiveness (impacts). That is why policies are solutions whose maturation demands continuity in the long run, since they are born associated with a central macro-problem whose overcoming demands much more time.

The programs are the microenvironment where solutions grow. They are the space for detailing if it is possible, with greater refinement, to focus on the public target, to estimate resources, to choose indicators, and to set goals.

Program goals mean the expectations of changing indicators, in due time, delivering products (short term), results (medium-term), and impacts (long term). Once again, it is program theory that presides the goal-formulation and the respective indicators-selection.

The programs make a central problem of a policy becomes manageable. They are battlefronts that work on smaller parts of a big problem. What is expected from a comprehensive and, at the same time, coherent, efficient, and effective policy is that these fronts, which run in parallel, produce synergistic and integrated results ahead, in the long term.

### **A basic criterion for *ex-ante* analysis**

The failure in distinguishing policies and programs generates a spiral of consequences. It is the first of many policy problems that will be born fragmented, with nebulous, redundant, inefficient, and ineffective programs, badly designed.

A more assertive approach could give a new meaning, for example, to multi-annual

plans. Multi-annual plans (as the Brazilian PPA) could be instruments for defining government policies (and not standalone sectorial policies from State ministries), with multi-sectoral objectives to overcome macro-problems, and associated with the national strategy for economic and social development (in Brazil, this national strategy, called Endes, is expected to extend over a twelve-year horizon).

Thus, policies to reduce inequality, regional development, social promotion, job and income generation, child and adolescent protection, regional integration, among others constitutionalized objectives and principles of the Republic (in Brazil, for example), are common to all the areas. They supposedly should surpass more than one government, registering themselves as objectives of the State, and not of one single government.

The use of a concatenated methodology would contribute to better tie the relationship between long and medium terms macro-priorities of each government, filling one of the gaps that have been pointed out as critical in government strategic planning (Couto e Cardoso, 2018).

The programs, in turn, would be the product *par excellence* of the ministries. They would vary according to the priorities of each government, but their design should include and update multiannual goals related to macro objectives, with the forecast of intermediate deliveries (4 years) capable of measuring the execution and effectiveness of medium-term planning and the consistency of the national long-term strategy.

Greater clarity in the relationship between policies and programs would also help to bury the debate that mistakenly opposes universalization and focused-designed policies. As a matter of fact, there is no focused-designed policy (Lassance, 2020). Focusing is always a contingent and strategic choice made by programs to define a specific

or prioritized public, given the difficulty of having a broader scope, at least immediately.

On one hand, programs are more likely to be focused because they focus attention on different and specific causes of a macro problem. On the other hand, policies are expected to be comprehensive just to bring distinct (focused) publics together under a universalist umbrella. Thus, focusing on a program does not undo the universal character of a policy, as seen in health, education, and social assistance public systems.

Another possible difficulty to be overcome or at least mitigated is the famous bad definition among the strategic, tactical, and operational fields. Amid the ambiguity, the “strategic” became such a trivialized concept that today it is another empty and useless concept.

Strictly speaking, when following a program theory, the strategic level is formulated at the policy level. Therefore, it concerns a central and multi-causal problem. The programs are, although they result from a strategic decision (strategy justifies or not the existence of a program), the field of tactics, that is, of mobilization, training, sequencing and monitoring of processes, budget programming, and evaluation of results.

The operational field, finally, occurs at the level of actions (activities or projects), at the dimension of management. It concerns the use of inputs, with flows (processes) oriented to optimize results (Lassance, 2015: 41).

These logical separatrices, if adopted, would improve governance and give management more autonomy, and also would delimitate the spheres of accountability. Top management should dedicate itself exclusively to politics, policy governance (not program governance), and to demand transparency and results, giving autonomy, and providing

the conditions so that programs can be created and implemented.

The role of presidents, ministers, governors, and mayors is to make decisions and to convince other crucial actors, outside their organization, from other governments and other branches, to align their preferences and expectations in the same direction.

Managers would take care of program governance. They would be tasked with planning, assembling, and commanding them. They should meet strategic requirements, but with a due delegation and the manager’s commitment to returning results accordingly agreed. Finally, those responsible for municipalities and state-owned companies would make it possible to deliver products and services.

The absence of a clear delegation strictly respecting these differences in governance roles is a gap that hinders not only the improvement of the design of policies and programs. It affects the entire governance chain, confuses, and strains the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats. It introduces inefficiencies. It compromises the ability for public service to be carefully evaluated.

In short, in this article, I proposed a new approach to policy and government program design as a basic criterion for *ex-ante* analysis<sup>6</sup>. From politicians and policy formulators to managers and street-level bureaucrats, *ex-ante* analysis can contribute to making latent incongruencies more glaring and evident.

Failures of this type can be easily and early detected by *ex-ante analysis*, even before any program takes its first step. Starting by asking what public policy is creating which programs are a good way to find out if there is something solid or only a mirage that melts in the air.

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## Notes

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- 2 The summary of interviews on policy and government programs topic is at <https://bit.ly/3lAqPJq>
- 3 *Ex ante* analysis is one that precedes implementation. More than that, it is the analysis that questions whether the intervention itself is necessary and beneficial to the solution of a public problem. Therefore, it may or may not include policy design.
- 4 One example of this perspective of integrating approaches is in the work carried out by researchers as Martha Cassiolato and Ronaldo Garcia, from Ipea. These works have been applied to various government agencies for decades. Some of the results of these studies, carried out with researchers with whom Cassiolato and Garcia gathered and shared their learning, are cited in this article.
- 5 The analogy between serial and parallel circuits in public policies was set by Herbert Simon e Allen Newell, 1970.
- 6 This article was discussed with some of those who were responsible by the Executive Order 9.191/2017 (Brazil, 2017) which now obliges Brazilian policy makers to offer *ex ante* analysis to policy and program design.