

**Blending Skill and Resources Across Multiple Levels of Activity:
Competences, Capabilities and the Policy Capacities of Government**

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Abstract

The policy capacity of a government is a key indicator and requisite of policy success. The term describes the preconditions a government requires in order to make sound policy choices and implement them effectively in achieving its potential to deal with public problems. Policy capacity is at heart a function of three competences or skills which affect the ability of governments to develop and craft effective policies: analytical ones which allow policy alternatives to be effectively generated and investigated; managerial ones which allow state resources to be effectively brought to bear on policy issues; and political ones which allow policy-makers and managers the room to manoeuvre and support required to develop and implement their ideas, programs and plans. Each of these sets of skills or competences requires resources or capabilities which exist at the individual, organizational and systemic levels. This article outlines the several different conceptions of policy capacity which exist at the interface between competences and capabilities and develops a synthetic framework for the overall analysis of policy capacity as a whole.

Introduction: Policy Capacity in Theory and Practice

Policy capacity has emerged as a major concern for governments in many countries in recent years due to the recurrent failures many have encountered in producing satisfactory outcomes from policy actions. The recent global economic crisis suggests that such failures are just as widespread and persistent in some of the most advanced economies in the world as in developing countries. The increasing level of complexity of many contemporary policy problems, coupling with rising expectations of the public, presents significant challenges to the ability of governments to make good decisions and to effectively implement them and concerns about whether such problems might outstrip the resources governments have to deal with them have sparked a renewed interest both among practitioners and scholars about the nature of policy capacity, its definition and composition.

Although there is no dispute among either group that policy capacity is a necessary condition for policy success, there are considerable disagreements on the conceptual definitions of policy capacity among scholars. First of all, some scholars argue that policy capacity is concerned only with the availability or quality of particular tasks such as policy advising to support decision-making, while others define policy capacity beyond policy

advising by including tasks such as the acquisition and utilization of policy relevant knowledge, framing options, the application of both qualitative and quantitative research methods, communications, and stakeholder management strategies (Howlett 2009; Oliphant and Howlett 2010). Others move well beyond the analytical category, however, to emphasize the systemic and structural preconditions of good governance – honesty, rule-of-law, merit appointments, social trust and legitimacy and other such characteristic – which they argue must first be fulfilled if analysis is to have any hope of influencing policy-making and policy outcomes (Holmberg and Rothstein 2010, Rotberg 2014).

Second, there is also no agreement on the stages of policy process where the concept policy capacity can be applied. Painter and Pierre (2006), for example, focus their attention on capacity for policy formulation only in their definition of the term as: “... the ability to marshal the necessary resources to make intelligent collective choices, in particular to set strategic directions, for the allocation of scarce resources to public ends.” But Glyn Davis (2000) argues that policy capacity should include ability of governments to implement preferred choices of action as well as decide upon them, and Parsons (2004) defines policy capacity as the ‘weaving’ function of modern governments---the ability to weave together the multiplicity of organisations and interests to form a coherent policy fabric.

There is also no agreement on whether or not policy capacity should be restricted to the capacity of the government, or public service, or extended to the non-governmental and private sector. Most scholars define policy capacity from the perspective of the government as the ability of governments to make intelligent choices (Painter and Pierre 2005), to scan the environment and set strategic directions (Howlett and Lindquist 2004; Savoie 2003), to weigh and assess the implications of policy alternatives (Bakvis 2000), and to make appropriate use of knowledge in policy-making (Parsons 2004; Peters 1996). Fellegi (1996), however, argue that the concept of policy capacity should include the nature and quality of

the resources available *to review, formulate and implement policies*, and the practices and procedures by which these resources are mobilized and used, both within the public service and beyond.

Thus, unfortunately, while the scholarly literature offers a large number of different definitions of policy capacity that highlight different dimensions of the subject, there has been no systematic attempt to develop an operational definition of policy capacity that encompasses all of the elements. Most of the existing definitions of policy capacity focus on what can be done with policy capacity, such as "to make intelligent collective decisions" and "to weigh and assess different alternatives", but fall short of specifying what policy capacity consists of. Some existing definitions focuses on policy outcomes, but policy outcomes can only been known after policy implementation, and policy capacity is not a sufficient condition for the success of a particular policy in a given time. The lack of operational definition has resulted in limited application of the concept in practice to date, despite the attention paid to it not just in the developing world but also in many developed countries (Brown et al 2013; Wang 2013; Hallsworth and Rutter 2011). This article serves to fill this gap.

Defining Policy Capacity: An Analytical Framework

Policy capacity is defined here as a set of skills, competences, resources, and institutional arrangements and capabilities with which key tasks and functions in policy process are structured, staffed and supported. The skills or *competences* are crucial to policy and governance success. However they also rely on their availability and the availability of adequate resources to allow them to be mobilized. The resources or *capabilities* must exist at the individual, organizational and system-levels in order to allow individual policy workers (Colebatch 2006; Colebatch et al 2011) and managers (Howlett and Walker 2012) to

participate in and contribute to designing, deploying, and evaluating policies. It includes not only their ability to analyse but also to learn and adapt to changes as necessary.

This is a broader definition than the widely-used one offered by Painter and Pierre (2006) who focus their attention on capacity for policy formulation in their definition of the term as: "... the ability to marshal the necessary resources to make intelligent collective choices, in particular to set strategic directions, for the allocation of scarce resources to public ends." Theirs is an unduly restrictive definition, as we have seen, since policy capacity is not only about the ability to formulate and make policy choices but also about the ability to perform tasks and functions in other stages in the policy process

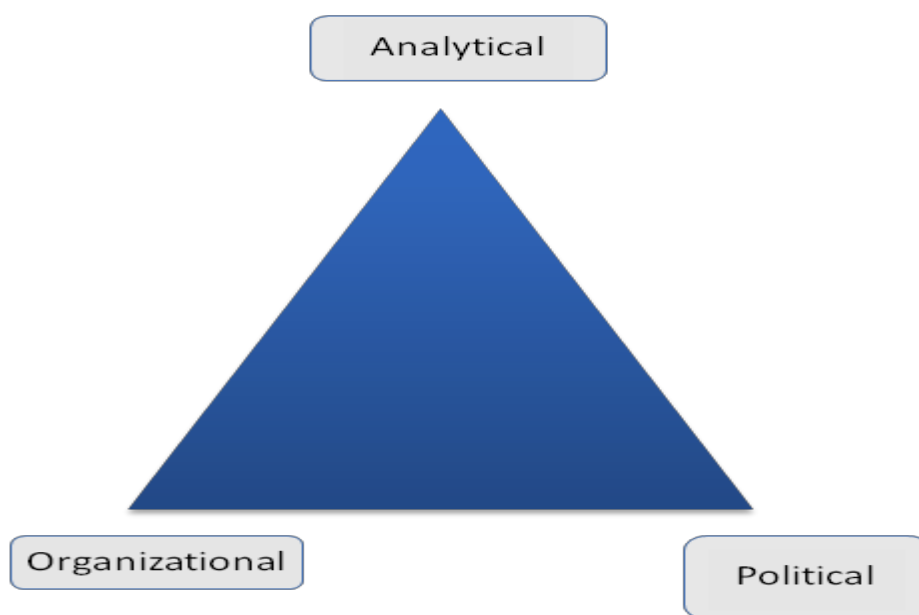
In order to develop an operational definition of the concept, we categorize various policy-relevant skills or competences, at three dimensions: the analytical, managerial and political. Analytical competences allow policy alternatives to be effectively generated and investigated; managerial capacities allow state resources to be effectively brought to bear on policy issues; and political capacities allow policy-makers and managers the support required to develop and implement their ideas, programs and plans (Wu et al 2010; Tiernan and Wanna 2006; Gleeson et al 2009; Gleeson et al 2011; Fukuyama 2013; Rotberg 2014) (See Figure 1).

Policy Skills and Competences

This categorization of the skill components of policy capacity offers significant improvement over existing definitions of policy capacity that emphasize on analytical dimension only. Thus, for example, using this multi-dimensional perspective it is not difficult to understand why policy failures are widespread and persistent in countries with high level of analytical capacities because policy successes demand competence and skills at all three dimensions for a high level of competence to exist. Such a categorization also offers

considerable advantage in the application of the concept in practice, as improvements over the three types of competences are governed by different processes and considerations which are lost when any are incorrectly juxtaposed.

Figure 1: Three Dimensions of Policy Competences



Policy Resources or Capabilities

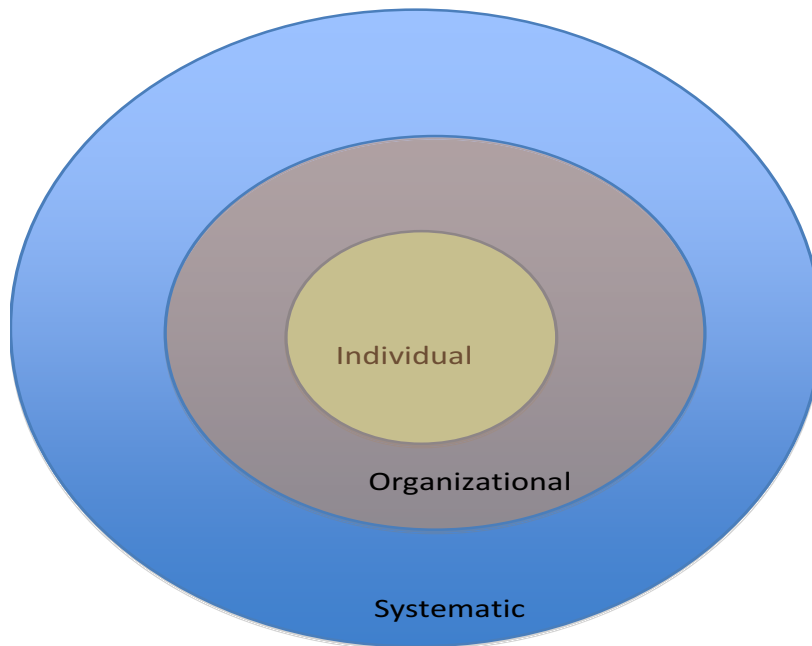
The next step in the development of a better operational definition of policy capacity involves the specification of the levels at which policy capabilities or resources accrue and can be measured. First of all, policy capabilities should be measured at the individual level. The skills and competences of key policy professionals, such as policy-makers, public managers, and policy analysts, play a key role in determining how well various tasks and functions in policy process but require various kinds of resources if they are to be exercised fully or to the extent they are needed. These resources exist at multiple levels, from that of

the individual analysts, managers and politicians involved in policy-making to the organizational level and beyond to the level of political, economic and social systems.

Conditions at the individual level most relevant are knowledge about policy processes, competence in policy analysis and evaluation, and managerial expertise. But resources must also be available at the level of the organization. These are aspects of the structure and make-up of policy-relevant organizations that affect their members' ability to perform policy functions as needed. Organizational features that unduly circumscribe individual decision capabilities or morale among policy workers, for example, can undermine an agency's ability to acquit its functions. The organizational conditions most relevant to policy capacity include those related to information, management, and political support (Tiernan and Wanna 2006; Gleeson et al 2011).

Finally, system level capabilities include the level of support and trust a public agency enjoys from its political masters and from the society at large (Blind 2006) as well as the nature of the economic and security systems within which policy-makers operate. Such factors are critical determinant of organizational capabilities and thus of public managers' and analysts capability to perform their policy work. Political support for both from both above and below are vital because agencies and managers must be considered legitimate in order to access resources from their authorizing institutions and constituencies on a continuing basis, and such resources must also be available for award in the first place (Painter and Pierre 2005). These three levels of policy capabilities are set out in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Three Levels of Policy Capacity



Policy Capacity as the Intersection of Competences and Capabilities

Combining the three dimensions and three levels, policy capacity can be measured and compared across multiple dimensions and levels of skills and resources. Policy capacity involving three sets of skills and three locations of resources needed for their exercise thus has nine fundamental components which are often juxtaposed in the literature. The nine components of policy capacity involving these three sets of skills or competences and the three locations of resources or capabilities needed for their exercise are set out in Figure 3 below. Each of these capacities is then discussed in turn.

Figure 3 – A Matrix Model of Policy Capacity

Level Dimension	INDIVIDUAL	ORGANIZATIONAL	SYSTEMIC
<i>Analytical</i>	<p>Analytical Capacity Knowledge of policy substance and analytical techniques and communication skills</p>	<p>Technical Capacity <u>Capability</u> in data collection; Availability of software and hardware for analysis and evaluation; Storage and Dissemination of operational information (eg. client need, service utilization; budget, human resources.); E-services.</p>	<p>Knowledge System Capacity Availability and sharing of data for policy research and analysis; <u>availability</u>, quality and the level of competition of policy advisory services in and out of government; presence of high quality educational and training institutions and opportunities for knowledge generation, mobilization and use access to information</p>
<i>Managerial</i>	<p>Managerial Capacity strategic management, leadership, communication, negotiation and conflict resolution, financial management and budgeting</p>	<p>Administrative Capacity Funding, staffing, levels of Intra- and inter-agency communication, consultation, and coordination.</p>	<p>Governance Capacity Levels of Inter-organisational trust and communication; Adequate fiscal system to fund programs and projects;</p>
<i>Political</i>	<p>Political Acumen Capacity Understanding of the needs and positions of different stakeholders; judgment of political feasibility; Communication skills</p>	<p>Political Resource Capacity Access to key policy-makers; Effective Civil Service bargain. Politicians’ support for the agency programmes and projects.</p>	<p>Legitimation Capacity Level of public participation in policy process; Public Trust; Presence of rule of law and transparent adjudicative system</p>

Source: Modeled after Wu et al 2010 and Tiernan and Wanna 2006

Nine Types of Policy Capacity

First, dealing with analytical competences, governments must have the individuals with the ability to acquire and use and internal external knowledge (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990; Ouimet et al. 2010) as well as (1) “*policy analytical capacity*” which refers to the ability to access and apply technical and scientific knowledge and analytical techniques (Howlett, 2009a; Riddell 1998). What governments do, indeed can do, and the likelihood of their success depend critically on their policy analytical skills in diagnosing problems and developing appropriate strategies for addressing them. Evidence-based policy making, for

example, requires that agencies have the necessary absorptive capacity at the individual level, which refers to their ability to absorb and process information or evidence in recognizing, formulating, deciding upon, implementing and evaluating policy. Governments are often do not use evidence even when it is available due more to lack of skills rather than intention (UK Cabinet Office 1999; Grimshaw et al., 2012; Howlett, 2009). The lack of internal capacity in this area cannot be easily offset by appointing external consultants because it requires considerable technical skills even to develop terms of reference for consultants, assess their output, and put them into practice (Howlett and Migone 2013).

They must also have the (2) '*technical capacity*' to allow an effective information and policy analysis system, which plays a critical role in effective formulation, implementation, and evaluation of public policies, to operate (Tiernan 2011; Craft et al 2013). Analytical skills are especially important in the context of the present emphasis on evidence-based policy which requires not only the ability to analyze data but also its availability in a timely and systematic manner (Davies et al, 2000). An effective information systems can play a pivotal role in enhancing overall governance and policy capacity if properly designed and implemented. This refers to the architecture for collecting and disseminating information within and across public sector agencies. An effective information system for the policy development allows finding and sharing of information more quickly and provide for re-use of existing information without duplication of efforts. There is often a vast amount of information on policy experiences stored across countless sites in an organization that can offer insights into the range of policy options available and their real life consequences. Collating the information and making it accessible to other policy makers brings great benefits to governments at small cost (Kwaterski 2010). A good system can also accelerate innovation as users connect and collaborate more easily and frequently and connect

governments to people by facilitating popular input into the policy process and the delivery of public services (Moon et al 2014; Akeroyd 2009).

Internally, information technology offers vast potential for improving integration and coordination within the public sector while enhancing the use of other analytical skills (Ambali, 2010). Another vital function for which ICT has tremendous potential is maintaining institutional memory within an organization and promoting policy learning. Policy learning and policy emulation is a vital part of the policy-making and policy managers need broad understanding of the policy practices and their performance in other countries, agencies, and sectors (Huber 1991; May 1999). Increased emphasis on accountability, transparency, and participatory government has similarly accentuated the importance of information technology and the state of the knowledge system present in a jurisdiction or society (Oh 1997).

At a larger level, the nature of the knowledge system in society or (3) “*knowledge system capacity*” is also a significant element of overall policy and governance capacity. This refers to the general state of educational and scientific facilities in a society, the availability, speed and ease of access generally to high quality information. Although many aspects of this type of capacity may be difficult to change or beyond the scope of individual government organizations and individual actors, they rely upon it implicitly and explicitly in order to perform their own analytical tasks effectively.

Managerial competence is also a high priority if policy capacity is to be enhanced or exercised effectively. At the level of individual managers, (4) “*managerial capacity*” or their ability to perform key managerial functions - such as planning, staffing, budgeting, and directing – is a vital determinant of the government’s overall policy capacity (Howlett and Walker 2011; Hicklin and Godwin 2009). In a survey conducted by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (Zhang, Lee and Yang, 2012), city and

county managers reported the following as the most important individual competencies and management skills needed in local government):

- Communication skills;
- Leadership;
- Teamwork;
- Budgeting and Financial management.
- Decision-making and problem solving;
- Ethics and integrity

Communication skills in particular must also be available in abundance. Internally, organizations must communicate their goals, operational plans, and operating procedures to their employees and, no less importantly, must give the latter a say in shaping them (Kuipers et al 2013; Matland, 1995). Leadership appears high on the ranked list of skills for public managers not only in the above survey but also in similar surveys in Manitoba (2001) and New Zealand (State Services Commission 1999). Research shows that leadership is especially critical if groups are to assume new challenges and devise new strategies for meeting them ¹ Developments in information technology have facilitated internal communication and augmented some aspects of managerial capacity but also pose new challenges, as mentioned in the preceding section. Modern managers also need a modicum of expertise in budgeting, accounting, and human resource management in order to perform effectively. These are skills that can be imparted by organizations and acquired by managers. There are established training programs of varying quality to train managers in principles of public sector accounting and skills in comprehending the balance sheet, cash flow statement, accrual accounting, and managerial cost accounting.

As was the case with analytical competences, managerial capacity extends beyond individual skill sets, however, to the organizational and system-levels. At the organizational

level, managers need (5) “*administrative capacity*” in order to function effectively (Edwards 2009; Craft et al 2013). This is a well known aspect of capacity and comprises the funding and staffing levels within which managers work as well as the nature of intra- and inter-agency communication, consultation, and coordination (Peters 2001). At the system level, how well managers perform also depends on (6) “*Governance Capacity*”, that is, how well they are trained and recruited, having career systems which promote competence and the presence of clear rules of law and engagement characteristic of Weberian administrative systems (Howlett 2004).

Necessary skills and competences go beyond the analytical and managerial to the level of political competences. In the public sector beyond leadership and negotiation skills, conflict resolution, and financial and human resources management, a key skill required of policy actors is political knowledge and experience or (7) “*policy acumen capacity*” (Wu et al 2011). This is a combination of what Head (2008) calls ‘political knowledge’ and what Tenbenschel (2008) termed ‘practical wisdom’. Policy acumen allows policy managers to develop quick judgment on the desirability and feasibility of different policies: what will be considered feasible or acceptable by managers, politicians, stakeholders or the public, what will not, and why. A keen nose for politics not only within but also the broader environment is essential for policy actors to be able to play an effective role in the policy process. Identifying the key actors and understanding their essential interests and ideologies as well as the relationships among them are essential traits of successful public managers. So is an understanding of the political trade-offs necessary for an agreement among contending actors and interests. Understanding of the key stakeholders, their key interests, and their strategies and resources is a key component of the political acumen capacity on the part of individual policy actors.

At the organizational level factors such as the existence of a good working relationship or ‘public service bargain’ between ministers and the public service are central to (8) “*organizational political capacity*” and effective governance (Salmonsén and Knudsen 2011). In principle, ministers are usually in charge of policy and the bureaucracy in charge of administration, although there is often no such clear distinction between the two roles in practice. Ministers need to remember that their function is to set directions and priorities and should not be involved in day-to-day operation. Involvement in their agencies’ routine operational matters is viewed as meddling which undermines public service’s morale. At the same time, all must work within an accountability system in place to ensure that the decisions are carried out and performance is rewarded or punished appropriately.² Similarly it is also important for the political executive to state their position on policy issues and express support for the officials implementing their policies. But their interventions in routine implementation need to be strategic and to avoid perceptions of ad hoc meddling, which undermines public managers’ morale and saps their operational capacity. Public managers, on the other hand, need to remember that their task is to carry out their minister’s priorities and decisions neutrally and professionally.

Communication with stakeholders and the general public is essential for policy and governance effectiveness because it enhances awareness, understanding, and support for government policies. Skillful communication can increase support for government’s policy objectives and make the task of governance easier and more effective (CommGAP, 2009). To succeed, governments need to define the issue and draw the public into focusing on it and actively contributing to its resolution (Post, Salmon and Raile, 2008). Without communication structures and processes which enable the two-way exchange of information between state and citizens, it is difficult to imagine how states can be responsive to public needs and expectations. Crucially, two-way communication allow citizens to monitor the

states' activities, to enter into dialogue with the state on issues that matter to them, and to influence political outcomes.”³ Strategies and tools for two-way communication with the public include “public interest lobbying, facilitating networks among like-minded political elites, building coalitions, and measuring and informing public opinion” (Haider, McLoughlin and Scott 2011).

At the system level, a significant aspect of policy capacity is (9) “*legitimation capacity*”. This extends beyond the wealth and resources a jurisdiction has to the presence of legitimacy and trust in government on the part of stakeholders and the public. Two-way communication with citizens is a complex web of “interlocking structures, processes, and practices”(World Bank 2011). For meaningful two-way communication to occur, governments need to create a public space where citizens can discuss and debate issues that matter to them with the aim to influencing policymakers. Public discussion and debate in the policy process helps to increase public awareness of the issues and provides a sense of ownership of reform. This requires an active civil society, an independent media, and freedom of speech and assembly (Haider, McLoughlin and Scott 2011). Freedom of information or right to information is increasingly viewed as an essential precondition for citizens to participate in the policy process.

Conclusion: Policy Capacity Deficits and Government Performance

Policy capacity at its core is a function of the interactions and inter-relationships that exist between the three sets of skills and three sets of resources set out above. The three critical skills essential for policy success are: political, managerial, and analytical. These skills need to be matched by critical resources at three levels: systemic, organizational, and individual.

Defining and operationalizing policy capacity is a very important, but only the first, step in applying the concept to the better understanding of policy-making and especially issues about the quality of policy-making and governance issues. The general idea, of course, is that higher levels of capacity are linked to superior policy outputs and outcomes while capacity deficits may be a major cause of policy failure and sub-optimal outcomes (Bullock 2001; Canadian Government 1996).

The three skills sets of government need to be matched by the availability of three sets of resources: systemic, organizational, and individual. But not all of these skills or competences are equally valuable and understanding how they are nested within each other is a critical concern for understanding capacity in practice and capacity building. Political skills form the arch-stone on which other skills rest, because they provide the policymakers levers to shape other wills and overcome obstacles and opposition to their actions. Without a modicum of legitimacy, trust and support, policy managers and agencies will find it impossible to make good policies and implement them well. Political support from both above and below are vital because agencies and managers must be considered legitimate in order to access resources from their authorizing environment on a continuing basis (Painter and Pierre 2005). Having such support and the policy skills which allow it to be developed and deployed allows policy-makers the room to manoeuvre and support required to develop and implement their ideas, programs and plans (Wu et al 2010; Tiernan and Wanna 2006; Gleeson et al 2009; Gleeson et al 2011; Fukuyama 2013; Rotberg 2014).

Similarly, analytical skills at the individual level require high levels of organizational support (Colebatch 2006; Colebatch et al 2011; Howlett and Walker 2012). Resources must also be available at the level of the organization whereby the structure and processes of the relevant policy agencies are so configured as to function smoothly. Organizational features that unduly circumscribe individual decision capabilities or morale among policy workers, for

example, can undermine an agency's ability to acquit its functions. The organizational conditions most relevant to policy capacity include those related to information, management, and political support (Tiernan and Wanna 2006; Gleeson et al 2011). Working at the meso level, managerial skills enable policy makers to deploy fiscal, personnel and other resources to achieve their goals. Similarly, analytical skills enable policy makers to analyse policy problems and assess effective solutions to them.

Overall this paints a picture of governments which enjoy a high level of policy capacity having the following characteristics:

- Policy professionals, including policy-makers, public managers, and policy analysts, with adequate skills, knowledge and competence that allow them to perform well in carrying out various tasks in policy process;
- organizations involved in policy development, including key government agencies, non-for-profit organizations and think tanks) with adequate resources (human resources, financial resources, and political support) that allow them to perform well in carrying out various functions in policy process;
- policy systems or sub-systems, including policy sectors, policy networks, policy communities, with adequate trust and institutional arrangements and resources to allow them to perform well in governing the relationships among policy professionals and among organizations involved in policy process

While achieving such arrangements may not be simple or easily accomplished, the framework set out helps to clarify the existing literature and provide policy-makers and others interested in good governance with a better idea of how capacities can be built and constructed from individual competences and capabilities than existing conceptions currently allow.

Endnotes

¹ Contemporary conceptions of leadership sees it less as related to charisma and more about coordinating group dynamics. As a British Cabinet Office (2001) report observed, “Research suggests that creating the appropriate climate within a team can account for approximately 30% of the variation in its performance and that the leader has a critical influence on this climate. About 70% of organisational climate is influenced by the styles (or consistent patterns of behaviour) a leader deploys in relating to others within the team.” Groups exist in all organizations at all levels and they function best when there is a commonly defined purpose and roles and expectations are broadly shared by members.

² Another vital function of the minister is to publicly defend the bureaucracy against possible criticisms when it is merely carrying out the government’s policies. In the real world of public policy, the line between making and implementing policy is thin and porous as both are involved in different capacities in the entire policy process. Yet a defined operational space for each needs to be delineated and accepted.

³ [<http://www.gsdrc.org/go/topic-guides/communication-and-governance/the-role-of-communication-in-governance-and-development>].

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