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### Assessing Policy Analytical Capacity: Comparative Insights from a Study of the Canadian Environmental Policy Advice System

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## Discourse

# Assessing Policy Analytical Capacity: Comparative Insights from a Study of the Canadian Environmental Policy Advice System

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**ABSTRACT** *The term “policy analytical capacity” (PAC) is used within the policy analysis literature to describe the ability of organizations to produce valuable research and analysis on topics of their choosing. This note discusses the results of an interview-based investigation into the PAC of several important environmental policy research organizations working on climate change policy in Canada – two governmental organizations and one NGO – in order to provide insight into the concept, how it can be examined and where future study would be helpful to better understand PAC and its implications.*

### Introduction: The Concept of Policy Analytical Capacity

An important area of study in the contemporary policy sciences focuses on the ability of public policy organizations to produce sound analysis to inform their policy-making activities (Dobuzinskis *et al.* 2007: 4–5). But there are many types and sizes of organizations that conduct public policy analysis on a wide range of issues and techniques. Techniques of analysis range from more formal ones such as cost/benefit analysis (Pal 2001: 291) to less formal ones such as public consultations (Pal 2001: 256–257). The term “policy analytical capacity” (PAC) has been developed within this literature to describe the ability of an organization to produce valuable policy-relevant research and analysis on topics of their choosing (Howlett 2009).<sup>1</sup>

Observers of policy research organizations have suggested that an organization's PAC is strengthened by its ability to “articulate its medium and long term priorities,

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test the robustness of its policy options by building alternative scenarios, attach both qualitative and quantitative assessments to different policy options . . . communicate and defend policy thrusts to its operational arms as well as to its major stakeholders and to the public, [and] formulate policies that can withstand rigorous professional challenge” (Fellegi 1996: 14–15). Attaining a high level of PAC thus requires: “a recognized requirement or demand for research (a market), a supply of qualified researchers, ready availability of quality data, policies and procedures to facilitate productive interactions with other researchers, and a culture in which openness is encouraged and risk taking is acceptable” (Riddell 1998: 5). These are all hypotheses, however, with little empirical evidence or systematic research to back them up. This research note suggests several techniques and results which help to further our understanding of the subject.

### **Policy Analytical Capacity and Canadian Climate Change Policy**

In order to help develop the concept of PAC, targeted interviews with senior policy practitioners were conducted in order to study the analytical capacity of three major environmental policy-making organizations working on climate change public policy in the Canadian system – a subject of much current interest and policy work which has highlighted the need for high policy capacity in order to facilitate adaptation to global warming and led to specific efforts to develop and improve capacity both in the governmental and nongovernmental sectors. Examination of key agencies in this sector thus will reveal any commonalities found in what are expected to be high-capacity agencies as well as any gaps or deficiencies; in either case enhancing our knowledge of the empirical circumstances on the ground and their relationship to existing literature and thinking about the subject.

The three organizations selected for examination were Environment Canada (EC), the major federal agency charged with environmental protection and the lead agency for climate change adaptation across the nation in areas of federal jurisdiction; the British Columbia Ministry of the Environment (BC MOE), a typical example of the provincial lead environmental agencies which are very significant players in climate change policy given the key role played by the provinces in Canada’s federal system of government; and the David Suzuki Foundation (DSF), a fairly new but high-profile environmental NGO operating in the climate change sphere. Each was expected to exhibit a high level of policy analytical capacity given their situation as high-profile lead agencies and research organizations in the government and NGO communities.

Of course, the study is not definitive in itself in terms of the overall operation of the complex policy advice systems found in the 14 federal, provincial and territorial governments active in Canada, as well as the hundreds of interest groups and business associations affected by climate change issues. However, by examining representative cases of the major types of organizations expected to exhibit the highest levels of capacity, the findings of this study provide helpful insights into the concept of PAC, how it can be examined, and where future research should be focused.

A series of semi-structured interviews took place over a six-month period between July and November of 2008 with the members of the three organizations. Three

criteria were used to determine which employees to interview: first, they should be policy analysts or be working in the field of policy analysis (managers, directors, etc.); second, their work should be focused (broadly) on the area of policy analysis on climate change issues; and third, they should have worked with their current organization for over three years, where possible. The questions asked were written in a comparable way to other similar questionnaires utilized in past studies dealing with policy analytical activities (Meltsner 1976: 295–297), modified in a way that would best provide information on specific aspects of the organization's PAC. Following Riddell (1998), each case study examined the education/training of the organization's employees; the types of policy analysis techniques used by the organization; the culture and structure of decision making in the organization (including the encouragement of innovative thinking and the inclusiveness of the decision-making environment); the nature and source of demand for the organization's research (including the nature of demand from within the organization and the nature of the demand from outside the organization); and the organization's access to necessary data and information.

## Case Studies

### *Environment Canada*

Information gathered from interviews with EC employees uncovered some factors that may be impediments to the attainment of strong PAC. For example, EC employees identified notable limits on the demand for EC's research and analysis from key decision makers such as the Federal Cabinet. Two interviewees suggested that, occasionally, higher up decision makers would make decisions without the input of analysts at lower levels. Another interviewee suggested that sometimes Cabinet-level deliberations and decision making may take place on "flimsy" details, indicating that at least on certain decisions and from some external sources, the demand for EC's research and analysis may be limited. This speaks towards the organization's inability, at times, to persuade decision makers to move in directions their research might support. Another interviewee said that management was, at times, reluctant to pay for certain information that might be helpful but expensive, a significant limit on the availability of information and data necessary for performing high-level policy analysis. Other limitations identified included tight deadlines and unstable political direction which prevented analysts from conducting in-depth or longitudinal studies.

Other indicators, however, identified some aspects of organizational routines and behavior which promoted enhanced policy analytical capacity. For example, the training and educational attainment of analysts was quite high. Of the five individuals interviewed at Environment Canada, four had Masters degrees (International Affairs, Natural Resource Management, Economics, Public Administration) and one had a PhD in Conservation Biology. Also, each of these interviewees had received training in formal policy analysis techniques, either through their education, or through courses offered through the public service. The interviewees combined both quantitative and qualitative research tools for policy analysis, and practiced a variety of different styles of policy analysis (Mayer *et al.*

2001). In addition, one interviewee stated that while upper level management and policy advisors had a greater chance of having their advice and analysis included in recommendations and policy directions, input from lower level analysts was an integral aspect of the organization's success, suggesting the existence of an open decision-making environment at the agency which promoted policy analytical activities at all levels of the organization.

### *BC Ministry of the Environment*

In general, there also appeared to be a mix of results with respect to the policy analytical capacity found within the British Columbia Ministry of the Environment. Like Environment Canada, training and educational attainment were high. For example, four interviewees held Masters degrees from Canadian universities focusing on environmental issues such as natural resources or agriculture. And, as at Environment Canada, the interviewees identified a variety of tools or techniques of policy analysis used at the ministry, ranging from more precise, quantitative methods like cost/benefit analysis to more qualitative methods such as consultations with the public or other stakeholders. And, again like the situation at Environment Canada, lower level analysts also suggested that the decision-making process within the ministry was fairly open and inclusive, adding to the organization's PAC through the encouragement of innovative thinking on new and existing problems. Other strengths of BC MOE's PAC include a demand or market for research inside and outside of the organization, and a good supply of necessary data for complex socio-economic and ecological analyses.

Conversely, the large size of the BC Ministry and the red tape involved in adopting new ideas, and the growing but still small supply of qualified researchers outside of its Climate Change Division were points raised in the interviews as weighing negatively upon the ministry's analytical capacity. The information gathered from these interviews suggests an interesting complexity, as different employees stated that both the large size of the BC MOE *and* its lack of qualified researchers (which would suggest hiring *more* people and increasing the size of the BC MOE) were the main limiting factors to producing better research and analysis. It very well may be that having more qualified researchers would not lead to any more of the restrictions or regulatory obstacles to research utilization that some interviewees identified as being responsible for limiting the department's ability to adopt new ideas and policies. The issue identified here, therefore, may have more to do with the organization of analysis rather than the sheer amount of analysis being conducted. More in-depth research into how analysis is organized in such organizations may help to answer questions in this area.

### *The David Suzuki Foundation*

Despite some limitations, the information gathered from the interviews suggests that this environmental NGO has quite strong policy analytical capacity for an organization of its size and budget. Like the two governmental agencies examined above, the organization's culture of decision making appears to be very open and encouraging of new ideas and innovative thinking from all levels. The demand from

inside the organization for high-quality research and analysis also appears to be strong, further strengthening the organization's overall capacity.

The interviewees, however, did not report the use of tools associated with the formal or rational style of policy analysis, such as CBA, effectiveness analysis, or economic impact analysis (Vining and Boardman 2007: 56–61). The tools used by the DSF tend to be much more informal than in the government ministries, relying less on quantitative tools such as CBA, but this informality may be partially made up for by the organization's ability to absorb knowledge produced by outside experts whose strengths complement any of DSF's weaknesses. Moreover, while the interviewees reported strong demand for their work from outside their organization, more research into the nature and extent of external demand for the work of the DSF would be helpful to better judge the organization's ability to access key decision makers, and the effect this factor has on their overall PAC.

Overall, the observations drawn from the interviews would suggest that the PAC of the Suzuki Foundation is robust in a number of areas, although there is no doubt room for improvements to be made. Specifically, a lack of data and information appears to be one factor that constitutes a clear impediment to improving an NGO's PAC, as is the lack of time and resources to hire new staff and take on new projects.

## Conclusion

Each of these three cases provides information about the dynamics involved in developing and enhancing policy analytical capacity among prominent governmental and nongovernmental organizations working in the policy advice systems of relatively well-off countries. While further studies of smaller provincial and territorial governments and less prominent NGOs, comparative cross-national studies, and the examination of lower profile, more "routine" issue areas would be required to assure the robustness of the conclusions reached above, this study suggests certain aspects of the models of policy capacity developed in the literature to date are accurate predictors of existing organizational capacities.

In the case of all three organizations, the interviews suggested that a high level of training and education of analysts is a key pre-requisite for enhanced PAC when coupled with an open organizational system which values analysis and allows for the communication of its results. A third key criteria is budgets and the availability of data and information, while a fourth is the organization of work to allow more than just short-term, "quick and dirty" analysis.

The cases also identified several barriers to enhanced policy capacity in each organization which reinforced the common findings. In the case of Environment Canada, for example, the interviews suggested that EC could strengthen its PAC by investing more time and resources towards collecting additional important information and data, and improving methods for linking their organization with relevant decision-making bodies such as the Federal Cabinet in order to better facilitate the exchange of important policy analyses. With respect to the BC Ministry of the Environment, more research into the *quality* of the research demanded from actors inside and outside of the BC MOE would be helpful to better understand the nature of the demand that the ministry has for its work and the impact that this has on analysts.<sup>2</sup> And in the case of the David Suzuki Foundation, the organization

would likely benefit from having more personnel with PhDs to engage in longer term policy analysis, but their recruitment of policy generalists who can tap into outside knowledge networks has allowed them to be quite effective in fulfilling their organization's role as both an advocacy group as well as a technical research body.

Future research on this subject should focus on gathering information and analyzing a more representative sample of policy research organizations in order to draw more in depth conclusions about the strength of Canada's climate change policy advice system. Including smaller provincial and territorial government organizations, as well as a more diverse range of NGOs in the sample would help achieve this goal. More generally, however, comparative research into the level and type of policy advice provided by organizations like the three studied for this project is required to inform similar judgments about the likely outcome of policy decision-making processes within other governmental and nongovernmental organizations. If the research carried out for this study has uncovered reasons to be optimistic about the PAC of both the governmental and nongovernmental elements of the climate change policy advice system in Canada, whether this same condition applies in less well-off, or even in similarly endowed nations, in this and other policy areas remains a critically important subject area for future research.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

1. Policy capacity, policy research capacity, and PAC are all roughly interchangeable terms used to describe the ability of organizations to perform policy analysis. However, while policy capacity is a general term that includes a "government's arrangements to review, formulate and *implement* policies within its jurisdiction" (Fellegi 1996: 1; emphasis added), policy research capacity and PAC are more specific terms that focus on the ability of organizations to perform research and policy analysis on public issues (Howlett 2009). The study of policy capacity in Canada gained considerable attention at the federal level in 1995 with the establishment of the Deputy Minister Task Force on Strengthening Our Policy Capacity. The task force's subsequent report, commonly called the Fellegi Report, named after the author Ivan P. Fellegi (then Chief Statistician at Statistics Canada), produced a series of recommendations for strengthening policy capacity in the federal government (1996: 38–40).
2. Also of note with this case is that similar findings are also highlighted in a report on policy capacity from the Government of Alberta (2007), which suggests the BC MOE is experiencing issues also recognized in other provincial jurisdictions.
3. The interviews show that important components of the Canadian environmental policy epistemic community are in a position to be able to provide a sufficient level of quality policy advice required to develop and implement effective policies. Whether or not this advice is adopted, of course, remains another issue related less to the quality of advice public officials receive, and more to their willingness to follow it. This, of course is also an interesting and important subject to explore.

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