

# UNDERSTANDING THE POLICYMAKING PROCESS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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WILLIAM ASCHER





*Understanding the Policymaking Process in Developing Countries* provides a uniquely comprehensive and practical framework for development practitioners, policymakers, activists, and students to diagnose and improve policy processes in developing countries across a wide range of issues. Based on the classic policy sciences approach, the book offers over 100 diagnostic indicators keyed to identify problems of policy processes, policy content, bureaucratic behavior, stakeholder behavior, and national-subnational interactions. This multi-disciplinary framework is applied to a host of policy problems that particularly plague countries experiencing the "under-development syndrome", including aborted programs and projects, policy impasses, distorted implementation, unnecessary harm and conflict, and shortsighted initiatives. These points are illustrated through cases from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Based on the developing countries' distinctive challenges, the book also offers recommendations on improving policy content and institutions to address the typical limitations.

**WILLIAM ASCHER** is Professor of Government and Economics at Claremont McKenna College, California. He has authored or edited nineteen books on political economy of development, natural resource and environmental policy, political psychology, forecasting methodology, physical infrastructure policy, and conflict-sensitive development. Ascher has twice won the Harold D. Lasswell Prize for best article in *Policy Sciences* and his book *Bringing in the Future* won the International Political Science Association's Levine Prize for the best public policy book of 2009. He has worked with the World Bank, USAID, and the EPA. He directed the Duke Center for International Development and served as Dean of the Faculty at Claremont McKenna College.

Cover image: Latitudestock/  
Gallo Images/Getty Images

COVER DESIGNED BY HART MCLEOD LTD

**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS  
[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

ISBN 978-1-108-40551-5



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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

4843/24, 2nd Floor, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, Delhi – 110002, India

79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108417617](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108417617)

DOI: 10.1017/9781108277990

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First published 2017

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

NAMES: Ascher, William, author.

TITLE: Understanding the policymaking process in developing countries / William Ascher.

DESCRIPTION: 1 Edition. | New York : Cambridge University Press, 2017.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2017030759 | ISBN 9781108417617 (Hardback) |

ISBN 9781108405515 (Paperback)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Developing countries—Economic policy. | Developing countries—Politics and government. | BISAC: POLITICAL SCIENCE / Economic Conditions.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC HC59.7 .A83553 2017 | DDC 320.609172/4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017030759>

ISBN 978-1-108-41761-7 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-40551-5 Paperback

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*To the development practitioners, of organizations  
big and small, striving to meet the daunting  
challenges of development*





## Acknowledgments

My exposure to the potentials and pitfalls of formulating, advocating, and implementing development initiatives has come from listening to the travails of hundreds of government officials, analysts, and activists across a broad range of institutions. Anyone who has attended the presentations by the International Fellows of the Duke Center for International Development, or has worked with the dedicated staff of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, cannot help but understand that whatever insights this book may have are based as much on their practical experiences as on the academic scholarship that necessarily dominates the volume's citations.

Rather than name hundreds of these people, I will single out Sudhir Shetty, Jennie Litvack, and Konstantin Atanesyan, who brought me into crucial learning experiences through World Bank work, and Craig Hammer, also of the World Bank, whose efforts to apply the policy sciences framework to development work has been a major inspiration for this volume. I owe a huge intellectual debt to Natalia Mirovitskaya, through myriad discussions, and always polite arguments, in the pursuit of our co-authored and co-edited works. A recent collaboration with Garry Brewer, Shabbir Cheema, and John M. (Jay) Heffron also leaves its fingerprints all over this volume. Finally, the exposition in this book would have been even more stilted were it not for the dedicated editing, among other enormous contributions, by Barbara Hirschfelder-Ascher.



# Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
1 Challenges to Effective Development Policymaking	i
2 The Policy Process in Developing Countries Really Is Different	13
3 The Expert's Risk: Endorsing Ill-Fated Initiatives	40
4 The Expert's Frustration: Rejection of Sound Knowledge or Recommendations	61
5 Overcoming the Impasses That Block Sound Initiatives	82
6 Inconsistent or Incomplete Enactment of Initiatives	107
7 Inadequate Accommodation for Excessive Deprivation	126
8 Reducing Avoidable Conflict	147
9 Minimizing Shortsighted Policies	162
10 Adapting Policy Initiatives and Institutions	179
11 Conclusions	193
<i>References</i>	205
<i>Index</i>	229





## Tables

1.1	Functions of the Decision Process	<i>page 9</i>
2.1	Corruption Levels and Per Capita Income	18
2.2	Average Governance Rankings for World Bank Gross National Income (GNI) Per Capita Categories	23
3.1	Core Problems, Causes, and Potential Indicators of Ill-Fated Initiatives	60
4.1	Root Problems, Causes, and Potential Indicators of Rejection of Knowledge or Recommendations	81
5.1	Core Problems, Causes, and Potential Indicators of Impasses That Block Sound Initiatives	106
6.1	Core Problems, Causes, and Potential Indicators of Inconsistent or Incomplete Enactment of Initiatives	125
7.1	Core Problems, Causes, and Potential Indicators of Excessive Deprivation	146
8.1	Core Problems, Causes, and Potential Indicators of Failing to Reduce Avoidable Conflict	161
9.1	Core Problems, Causes, and Potential Indicators of Shortsighted Policies	178



## Challenges to Effective Development Policymaking

The purpose of this book is to orient citizens, activists, students, planners, and policymakers to contribute more effectively to the public policy processes of developing countries, through greater understanding of the dynamics and pitfalls of these processes. One premise of the book is that in each specific context, readily available knowledge is limited by three vital factors: stakeholders' and policymakers' assumptions and true preferences, the range of paths through which policy initiatives can be channeled, and the technical and political obstacles that can undermine sound policy initiatives. Without guidance on how to understand the origins of dysfunctions of the process, identify the appropriate range of stakeholders who ought to be involved, or identify the opportunities to navigate the policy process more effectively, sound policy initiatives may falter or become seriously distorted.

It is also true that planning, policy selection, implementation, and evaluation are intricately intertwined – these aspects must be considered as a whole. Therefore, this book is not only a guide and a critical assessment of the governmental policy processes across the whole range of policies, but it also tries to illuminate the interactions among all of the decision functions involved in this policy process. This is necessary both for maneuvering within existing processes and for developing more effective processes.

### THE DEVELOPMENT CONTRIBUTOR'S CHALLENGE

A crucial insight for understanding the challenges in trying to contribute to sound development is that *everyone* is an outsider with regard to major



aspects of the policy process. Obviously foreign development practitioners are outsiders. Individual citizens and groups outside of government are not privy to many of the deliberations within government. Yet even within government ranks, a planner or policymaker of one agency is an “outsider” with respect to the inner machinations of other agencies. Top leaders of the national government are outsiders with respect to subnational governments, and they have no realistic way to know everything about the thoughts and actions of staff within the agencies over whom these leaders ostensibly have authority. Therefore, in addition to the practical problem that misperception often abounds, the analytic challenge is for all participants to be able to make reasonable inferences about the motivations and perceptions of others involved in the development-policy process. Much of this book is devoted to suggesting suitable diagnostic indicators to make these assessments.

#### SEVEN KEY PROBLEMS IN PURSUING SOUND DEVELOPMENT-POLICY INITIATIVES

To make this guide as useful as possible, it is organized around seven fundamental problems commonly encountered in the pursuit of sound development-policy initiatives. They are:

*Support of Ill-Fated Initiatives.* Without understanding and anticipating how seemingly sound initiatives will be weakened or distorted, or without the capacity to prevent this from happening, anyone involved in the formulation or support of particular policies runs the risk of endorsing an ill-starred effort. This could supplant more promising initiatives, as well as discredit the endorser. Many donor governments, international assistance agencies, and NGOs have fallen into the trap of supporting initiatives based on weak intelligence. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development supported a major Kenyan project to introduce genetically-modified cassava, only to learn that insufficient preliminary research missed the new strain’s vulnerability to cassava mosaic disease, leading to 30 percent crop losses (East African Magazine 2006).

Another form of intelligence – to which policymakers critical to the approval and enactment of a sound initiative might not be sufficiently committed – may be lacking. Development practitioners and aid agencies may be sucked into supporting initiatives that falter when the government’s commitment declines, as in the failure of the Bangladesh government to deploy half of the \$400 million Health and Population Sector Program