A new knowledge synthesis method
to effectively inform decision makers about public policies

A methodological workshop

By
Florence Morestin, M.Sc. (NCCHPP)
François-Pierre Gauvin, Ph.D. (NCCHPP)
Maude Chapados, Ph.D. (INSPQ)

National Collaborating Centre for Healthy Public Policy

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Imagine the following scenario...
The government wants to act to combat obesity and is asking the following question:

**What are the most effective policies for addressing obesity?**

You have been asked to produce a knowledge synthesis to inform their decision...
In 2005, the NCCHPP was given a dual mandate

1. produce a **knowledge synthesis** aimed at identifying **policy options that seem to be effective** at addressing obesity

2. document **the methodological issues** associated with this exercise
But what exactly is a "Public policy"?
No agreed upon definition

A few associated terms
- Positioning
- Act, regulation
- Action plan
- Strategy
- Programs, measures
Toward an operational definition
Elements that give rise to a public policy (PP)
But what exactly is a "knowledge synthesis"?
A knowledge synthesis

"[…] means the contextualization and integration of research findings of individual research studies within the larger body of knowledge on the topic. A synthesis must be reproducible and transparent in its methods, using quantitative and/or qualitative methods" (CIHR, 2008)

Different types of syntheses (CIHR, 2008)
- Systematic reviews (e.g.: Cochrane Collaboration) and meta-analyses
- Scoping reviews
- Narrative syntheses
- Realist syntheses
- Consensus conferences and expert panels

Why a specific method applicable to public policies?

• **A policy is not a simple intervention**
  • The decision maker is a public authority who is accountable
  • Applied at the population level

• **Beyond effectiveness**
  • Policy makers are interested in implementation issues

• **Beyond the literature**
  • Sometimes few studies have been published
  • Need to contextualize the data
Five principles guiding our reflection

1. Methodological rigour
2. Political relevance
3. Broadened conception of evidence
4. Flexibility – The best is the enemy of the good
5. We should play the role of an "honest broker"
   (Pielke, 2007)

Some sources of inspiration

- Political science(s)
- Public policy evaluation and analysis
- Deliberative processes
- Evidence-informed decision-making
A synthesis in four steps

Analytical framework: effectiveness, unintended effects, equity, cost, feasibility, and acceptability.

Step 1: Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis

Step 2: Explication of the intervention logic

Step 3: Synthesis of data drawn from the literature

Step 4: Enrichment and contextualization of data
Step 1.
Inventory of options and choice of policy
You sketch a portrait of the problem and of all the proposed policy options for addressing it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grey literature</th>
<th>Scientific literature</th>
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| • Websites of national and international organizations interested in the targeted health problem | • Websites that inventory systematic reviews
|                                                      | • Optional: preliminary exploration of databases          |
From among all the proposed options, how do you choose the one that will be the subject of the knowledge synthesis?
Who chooses the policy option that will be the subject of the knowledge synthesis?

**Authority**
The choice is imposed by the decision maker.

**Negotiation**
The choice is determined following negotiations between you and the decision maker.

**Autonomy**
You have complete autonomy to choose.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selection strategies</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Limitations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Convenience</strong></td>
<td>Saves time, money and energy</td>
<td>Weak rationality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy options are chosen for practical reasons tied to accessibility of data and cost.</td>
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<td>Weak credibility</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Political importance</strong></td>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>Some promising options can be brushed aside because they are not aligned ideologically with the government of the day.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy options are chosen because they are linked to sensitive political issues or issues on the government’s agenda.</td>
<td>Can draw attention to the synthesis by choosing a politically sensitive option (or try not to draw attention by choosing a non-sensitive option)</td>
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<td>Useful for placing an option on the decision-making agenda or for blocking an undesirable option</td>
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<td><strong>Based on criteria</strong></td>
<td>Makes it possible to choose an option based on a criterion one wishes to study</td>
<td>Can introduce a bias by choosing one criterion rather than another</td>
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<td>The policy options are selected on the basis of certain predetermined criteria (e.g.: policy options that are low-cost, that raise issues of equity or social acceptability, etc.)</td>
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<td><strong>Maximum variation</strong></td>
<td>Makes it possible to generalize or to find cases that deviate</td>
<td>Makes it necessary to produce more than one synthesis, which takes more time, money and energy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy options are chosen because they vary greatly with respect to a single dimension (e.g.: from the least to the most coercive option)</td>
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</table>
E.g.: "What can the government do in the area of nutrition to prevent obesity?"

- Regulation of advertising that targets children
- Food available in schools
- Nutrition labelling
- Taxing junk food
- Portion sizes
- ...

If several policies are selected:
a synthesis for each one
=> Having a manageable amount of data
Step 2.
The logic model
A synthesis in four steps

Step 1: Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis
Step 2: Explication of the intervention logic
Step 3: Synthesis of data drawn from the literature
Step 4: Enrichment and contextualization of data

You are here!
• Prior to data collection

• How many of you have heard of logic models?
• How many have used one?

• Many terms...
  – logic model, theoretical model, conceptual framework, logical framework, etc.
• ...and they are assigned different meanings

• We do not wish to enter into these debates
  What is important = understanding the proposed way of proceeding
Usually:

- A public policy is proposed as a means of obtaining a desired effect
- But the intervention logic (mechanisms of action) is not made explicit
Detail the intervention logic

Deconstruct the chain of expected effects between the public policy and the problem targeted

(Champagne et al., 2009; Weiss, 1998)


Example: Nutrition labelling

Public policy

Nutrition labelling

Intermediate effects

Purchase of healthier foods

Better-informed consumers

Healthier diet in terms of quantity and quality

Effect on the problem

Obesity prevention
The logic model is not...

... a causal model:

– Does not represent all the causes of the targeted problem, only those targeted by the policy under study

Example: Causal web for obesity

Source: Groupe de travail provincial sur la problématique du poids (inspired by work carried out by the International Obesity Task Force), 2004, p. 12

The logic model is not...

... proof of causality:

– It represents the *theory* of how the public policy should produce its intended effects
– Data collection will indicate whether this proves true in reality
Contribution of logic model

1. Define the subject of the knowledge synthesis
   - Too complex a model = confusion among several policies?
     - E.g.: Improving food environments in schools
     - ⇒ a family of different types of policies
   - To be able to manage the data gathered:
     Narrow down the subject of study until there is a single mechanism of action

2. Plausibility of the intervention logic?
   - If plausibility is weak: not worth pursuing

3. Examine effectiveness step by step
   - Identify what is more or less likely to succeed (effectiveness gaps), to be verified during data collection
   - If there is a significant gap upstream: not worth pursuing
Contribution of logic model (cont’d)

4. Guide data collection
   – Relevant intermediate effects to document
   – Interesting, because data on ultimate effects of public policies are scarce

5. Strengthen the assumption of causality
   As opposed to simply correlating policy and ultimate effect

6. Structure the synthesis (the report)
   – In the text synthesizing the effectiveness data: a sub-section for each intermediate effect
   – Useful as a guide to decision making and action
Constructing a logic model

• Reflection based on:
  – knowledge gathered during the preliminary exploration of the literature
  – (as needed) consultation with experts
  – simple reasoning

• On one side, name the policy under study
• On the other, name the ultimate effect sought
• Identify the logical steps that lead from one to the other
  “if... then”
• Suggestion: Start by noting the “last” intermediate effect
  – Generally the most well-known in the field of public health
  e.g.: food intake => obesity
  smoking => lung cancer
Constructing a logic model (cont’d)

• Variable number of steps

• One path or many

• == Simplicity ==
  – Key to establishing level of precision: is additional detail useful for reflecting on data collection?
Constructing a logic model (cont’d)

• No "right answer"

• Tool to guide reflection

• Possible discussion aid
  (e.g. with mandator of the knowledge synthesis)

• **Iterative construction**
  – Prior to data collection
  – During: rework model based on data found
Small group activity

The logic model
Imagine the following scenario...

You are called to a meeting.

You are informed that the Minister of Health is concerned about the consumption of energy drinks by young people.
Energy drinks
(Dubé et al., 2010; Plamondon, 2011)

• Consumption observed among young people in high school or college

• Health risks:
  – Caffeine (main active ingredient):
    • Excessive consumption => undesirable effects ranging from nausea to heart arrhythmia
    • Addiction
    • Withdrawal symptoms => depleted energy, drowsiness, depressive mood, difficulty concentrating, headache, irritability, etc.
    • Children and adolescents: group sensitive to the effects of caffeine
  – Association with alcohol: masks feelings of drunkenness => may lead to greater consumption of alcohol and at-risk behaviour
  – Sugar (regular consumption): negative impact on dental health and body weight

Energy drinks
(Dubé et al., 2010; Plamondon, 2011)

Marketing practices:
• Sold along with other sugary drinks
• "beneficial" effects over-emphasized / undesirable effects eclipsed
• Themes that attract young people

The government is weighing the idea of banning the sale of energy drinks to those under 18 years old.

Your mission
Produce a knowledge synthesis to inform the government about this option.
Exercise: Construct the logic model for the banning of energy drink sales to minors

Public policy

Ban on sale to minors

Intermediate effects

Effect on the problem

Prevention of associated health problems
A framework for analyzing public policies (PPs): why?
A few reasons...

- Better inform decision makers
- Assess the chances of a PP succeeding
- Make use of a more systematic analysis process focused on six dimensions of a PP

... beyond a knowledge synthesis
What do we wish to document?

1) Effectiveness  
   ...but also, the importance of the implementation context

2) Decision maker: a public authority
   - Is accountable
   - Is subject to various forms of pressure

3) Scope of implementation

4) Amount of resources required
A framework for analyzing six dimensions

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Major sources of inspiration: Salamon, 2002; Swinburn et al., 2005


1- A PP's effectiveness as a means of addressing the targeted problem

- The most important dimension to document:
  - Positive, neutral or negative effects
  - Intermediate effects
  - Plausibility of the intervention logic
  - Impact of context on the policy’s effectiveness

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2- Unintended effects of a PP

- Unrelated to the objective pursued
- Effects in all sorts of areas
  Health (aspects other than the targeted problem), economic, political, environmental, tied to social relations, etc.
- Positive or negative

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3- A PP's impact on equity

- Differential effects of the PP on various groups (defined by age, gender, ethnicity, geographic or socio-economic environment, etc...)

- Effects on social inequalities in health (distribution of the targeted health problem)
4- Financial costs of a PP

Cost in absolute terms

• Implementation cost for the government
• Implementation cost for other actors

... but also:

• Relative cost
• Cost-effectiveness
• Distribution of cost over time
• Visibility of costs
5- Technical feasibility of a PP

- Pilot project = good indication
- Conformity with other legislation and the sharing of governmental capacities
- Availability of expertise and of material and technological resources
- Automaticity*
- Degree of directness*
- Hierarchical integration**

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5- Feasibility (continued)

• Number of actors involved in implementation

• Quality of cooperation among the actors
  (acceptability)

• Ability of actors to interfere
  (acceptability)

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6- Acceptability of a PP

- Stakeholders' judgements regarding a PP
  (targeted groups, the wider public, other ministries, other decision makers, public administrators, political organizations, funding agencies, professional groups, the media, industry, etc.)

- Most complex analytical dimension, and directly interacts with the other 5 dimensions

- Influences the adoption, implementation and potential for success of a PP

- To be documented throughout the process

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6- Acceptability of a PP (continued)

- Depends on subjective factors that are external to the PP (beliefs, values, knowledge, fields of interest, etc.)

Two types of judgement

1) Concerning the intrinsic characteristics of a PP

- acceptability of acting on the targeted problem
- acceptability of the proposed PP

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6- Acceptability of a PP (continued)

2) Concerning the conditions for adoption and implementation of a PP

- perceived legitimacy of decision makers and decision-making process

- legitimacy and abilities of actors involved in the implementation of a PP

- planned accountability measures

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| Implementation | Cost            |
|               | Feasibility     |
|               | Acceptability   |
In short ...
An extraction table

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Characteristics of document</th>
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The dimensions and their relationships

Effects
- Effectiveness
- Unintended effects
- Equity

Implementation
- Cost
- Feasibility

Acceptability

→ = influence
Group exercise
The government is weighing the idea of banning the sale of energy drinks to those under 18

Your mission

Produce a policy analysis to inform the government about this option
Step 3.
Collection and analysis of data drawn from the literature
A synthesis in four steps

Step 1: Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis

Step 2: Explication of the intervention logic

Step 3: Synthesis of data drawn from the literature

Step 4: Enrichment and contextualization of data

You are here!
Dual challenge:
A literature review that is **rigorous** and **adapted to public policies (PP)**

Not a systematic review

= SIMPLE OVERVIEW =
Details: consult the document
What are your usual sources of data?

– Scientific literature
  • Including qualitative data?

– Grey literature
  e.g.: Research reports, theses, documents produced by governments or NGOs, statements by professional associations, opinion polls., etc.
The documentary search

RIGOROUSNESS
Describe the process (record): transparency and reproducibility

Inclusion and exclusion criteria
e.g.: content, countries, period, language

No convenience sampling

ADAPTATION for public policies (PPs)

Openness: Do not document only effectiveness, decision makers need more

Scientific literature
AND grey literature

Websites; in particular:
– Governments and NGOs
– Public health and other affected sectors
– Québec, Canada and international

Several disciplines
e.g.: public health, political science, sociology, anthropology, economics, ethics, law...

List of databases
Appraisal of the quality of data

**RIGOROUSNESS**

- Describe the principal characteristics of the documents selected
e.g.: type, source, design, authors' affiliations, potential sources of bias

**ADAPTATION for PPs**

- The hierarchy of evidence excludes relevant evidence regarding PPs
- Sort documents according to their relevance (contribution to the knowledge synthesis)
Data extraction

RIGOROUSNESS

Extraction table

ADAPTATION for PPs

Type of data to extract

Refer to analytical framework

65
Data synthesis

**RIGOROUSNESS**

Use **all** the data extracted

No selecting for convenience

**ADAPTATION for PPs**

**Narrative** Synthesis
Limited resources? A few shortcuts

**Automatic documentary searches** in PubMed, by topic. Ontario Public Health Standards website:

http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/providers/program/pubhealth/oph_standards/ophs/litss.html

PubMed = one database among others...

**Limit the number of documents to be analyzed**

- Existing literature reviews + documents published subsequently
  - *See list of alternative resources*

- An existing review will never cover *all* the aspects that interest us
  - Can be complemented by deliberative processes
Limited resources? A few shortcuts

Limit the number of documents to be analyzed (continued)

• Narrow the inclusion criteria
  – In particular, by country, time period

• Begin reading + saturation criterion
  – To avoid bias: Read documents in a neutral order, e.g., reverse chronological order and, alphabetically, by author

• Ignore the grey literature (Warning !!!)
  – Suggested in rapid review methods
  – But results in loss of much relevant data
  – Can deliberative processes compensate for this?
Shortcuts - Warnings

• The result is always less optimal than with a full literature review

• Remain transparent about the process followed

• Indicate the limitations and biases introduced
Step 4.
Enrichment and contextualization
A synthesis in four steps

Step 1: Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis

Step 2: Explication of the intervention logic

Step 3: Synthesis of data drawn from the literature

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You are here!
You have **FINALLY** completed your literature review.

But you are still concerned about certain things...
For example...

Data robustness?
The « evidence » is limited or is not robust.

Issues are not well-documented?
There are perhaps certain issues that are not identified or addressed in the literature.

Transferability?
You do not know if the knowledge from the literature is applicable to your own context.
A deliberative process

can enrich and contextualize your literature review
Deliberation

1. Act of reflecting, of examining a question, discussion
2. Decision made during the course of this examination
3. Thoughtful examination preceding a decision
4. Mandatory consensus required for any decision handed down by a trial court

[Translation]
The ladder of deliberation

- Choose a policy option
- Formulate recommendations
- Formulate value statements
- Identify or clarify issues

Our proposed method

© iStockphoto.com/ Keith Webber Jr.
A deliberative process

1. The objective is to identify and clarify issues

2. A meeting (by invitation) with a group of 10-20 key informants (e.g.: experts, professionals, decision makers, and civil society actors) which can extend over 1-2 days

3. A summary of the literature review is submitted to them before the meeting (ideally 2-3 weeks ahead)

4. The meeting is led by a moderator and follows certain procedural rules (e.g.: Chatham House Rule)
“When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant may be revealed.”
A deliberative process

1. The objective is to identify and clarify issues

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3. A summary of the literature review is submitted to them before the meeting (ideally 2-3 weeks ahead)

4. The meeting is led by a professional moderator and follows certain procedural rules (e.g.: Chatham House Rule)

5. The participants critically examine the problem, the proposed option and its implications (i.e. effectiveness, unintended effects, equity, cost, feasibility, and acceptability)

6. A thematic analysis of the meeting will be produced and transmitted to the participants
Who is talking about them?
Abstract

Systematic reviews are increasingly seen as helpful “knowledge support” for managers and policy makers, and deliberative processes are starting to be seen as promising, locally contextualized “decision support.” Increases to the flow of systematic reviews should be complemented by efforts to facilitate the retrieval, and adapt the presentation, of the available stock of systematic reviews. Research and other evidence should be combined in transparent ways to facilitate cross-context learning. The challenge for managers and policy makers moving forward will be to avoid the confusion that comes from the blending of both systematic reviews and deliberative processes.
Getting evidence into policy: The need for deliberative strategies?

Kathy FitzRoy A, James Gillespie B, Glenn Salkever A, Stacy Carter A, Lyndal Tevena B

A Sydney School of Public Health, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia
B Department of Health, Government of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia
C Bassett Institute for Public Health, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia
D Sydney School of Public Health, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia
E Centre for Public Policy, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

ABSTRACT

Getting evidence into policy is notoriously difficult. In this empirical case study we used document analysis and key informant interviews to explore the Australian federal government's policies to implement a national breast cancer screening program, and the role of evidence in this policy. Our analysis revealed a range of institutional limitations at all levels of government, within the health department, between government departments, and across the sector. These limitations were amplified by the pressures of the 2004 Australian federal election campaign. Traditional knowledge utilization approaches, which rely on structured processes and focus on the individual, rather than the institutional level, are often insufficient to ensure evidence-based implementation. We propose a new approach to evidence utilization, rooted in distributed knowledge and located in a decision environment that aims to ensure clinicians make evidence-based decisions. In this paper, we examine the role of evidence in the decision-making process, and the use of deliberative models to enhance evidence utilization by decision-makers. Such models may help overcome the limitations on the use of evidence by embedding public review of evidence as one step in the institutional decision-making process.

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How We Move Beyond a Policy Prescription to Action

Marie E. Oliver, MPA
Post-doctoral Fellow
Program in Policy Analysis
Center for Health Economics and Policy Analysis
McMaster University

Judith Shramim, PHD, DLO
President and Chief Executive Officer
Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) Canada

ABSTRACT

In response to "Evidence-Based Policy Prescription for an Aging Population," by Chapfphot and Hollander, this paper proposes that efforts be made to ensure strategies to build the political momentum and public support necessary for concrete action related to the recommendations. It also suggests the implementation of knowledge translation strategies to address information gaps and integrating existing successful programs across the sector. Finally, this paper proposes a conceptual and robust mobilization of forms in order to move from evidence-based agendas setting into actual policy implementation. A key element of this recommendation involves placing greater emphasis on evidence-based acceleration and public policy deliberation. Such a focus would enable continuous dialogue between policy makers, decision makers, interest groups, and the public, garnering the support necessary to align the implementation of healthy public policies that best serve the needs of an aging population.
Who is conducting them?
What are the risks (real or perceived)?

**Project management** - Implementing a deliberative process takes time and resources. It can be viewed as potentially more cumbersome than current processes.

**Scientific** – The implementation of a deliberative process can be perceived as a threat to the independence/scientific autonomy of certain experts or to the scientific objectivity of their work.

**Political** - Certain issues can be politically sensitive and some decision makers may not welcome the creation of a space for deliberation on these subjects.

**Deliberation** – Deliberations are driven by complex group dynamics (e.g.: power and interests).
The benefits expected from deliberation

Adds to the scientific robustness of the synthesis

Certain issues are better-documented

Increase the relevance of the synthesis to decision makers

Support the use of knowledge*

Small group activity
The deliberative process
Imagine the following scenario...

You have produced a literature review on the banning of energy drink sales to those under 18 years old.

You want to organize a deliberative process to enrich and contextualize the review.
1. **Which aspects** would be better documented by deliberative processes than by the literature?

2. **Who would you invite** to take part in such a process **AND why**?

3. **What issues** are raised by this?
After the 4 steps...

Integrating the different kinds of knowledge gathered
Structure of the knowledge synthesis document

• Transparent description of the process
• Logic model of the policy under study
• Synthesis of data drawn from the:
  – Scientific literature
  – Grey literature
  – Deliberative processes

On the 6 dimensions of the analytical framework
Use of the method

- The whole is more than the sum of its parts
- But sometimes you may want to use only parts of the method
You want to do a quick scan of potential policy options to address a problem.

Scenario 1

Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis

Explication of the intervention logic

Synthesis of data drawn from the literature

Enrichment and contextualization of data
You want to reflect on the potential effectiveness of a policy option.

**Scenario 2**

- **Step 1**: Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis
- **Step 2**: Explication of the intervention logic
- **Step 3**: Synthesis of data drawn from the literature
- **Step 4**: Enrichment and contextualization of data
More scenarios – Logic model

- For communication purposes, you seek to represent simply the way a public policy works

- You wish to facilitate a discussion among various stakeholders about a public policy
  - Joint construction of the logic model

- You are mandated to evaluate a policy’s effectiveness, and you wonder where to focus the evaluation
You are asked to produce a literature review on a given public policy. You are looking for an adapted approach.

**Step 1**
Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis

**Step 2**
Explication of the intervention logic

**Step 3**
Synthesis of data drawn from the literature

**Step 4**
Enrichment and contextualization of data
A high-quality literature review is released that addresses an important policy issue in your region / province. You are interested in contextualizing the results of that literature review.

- **Step 1**: Inventory of policies and selection of subject of synthesis
- **Step 2**: Explication of the intervention logic
- **Step 3**: Synthesis of data drawn from the literature
- **Step 4**: Enrichment and contextualization of data
You are looking for a framework to conduct a policy analysis.

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List of recap questions
Many thanks!

• To the members of our scientific committee
  – Kristina Maud Bergeron, INSPQ
  – Gaston Gadoury, ASSS Abitibi-Témiscamingue
  – Geneviève Hamel, NCCHPP
  – Marie-Christine Hogue, NCCHPP

• To Laurie Plamondon, INSPQ
Florence Morestin, M.Sc.
Tel.: 514-864-1600 ext. 3633
florence.morestin@inpq.qc.ca

François-Pierre Gauvin, Ph. D.
Tel.: 418-650-5115 ext. 5544
francois-pierre.gauvin@inpq.qc.ca

Maude Chapados, Ph.D.
Tél.: 514-864-1600 poste 3629
maude.chapados@inpq.qc.ca

190 Crémazie Blvd. East
Montréal, Québec H2P 1E2

945 Wolfe Ave., Rm. A5-52
Québec City, Québec G1V 5B3