Communicating PAM Results to Policymakers

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Pearson received his B.S. in American Institutions (1961) from the University of Wisconsin, his M.A. in International Relations (1965) from Johns Hopkins University, and his Ph.D. in Economics (1969) from Harvard University. He joined the Stanford faculty in 1968.

Results from the Policy Analysis Matrix (PAM) need to be communicated to policymakers. The communication of PAM results is discussed and illustrated in Eric A. Monke and Scott R. Pearson, *The Policy Analysis Matrix for Agricultural Development* (hereafter *PAM*), 1989, Chapter 12, pp. 242-246, 252. A prototype policy brief reports the PAM results for a Portuguese wheat system (the one illustrated in detail in lecture 3) in *PAM*, pp. 249-252.

Slide 2
Good policy analysis requires four essential steps. The materials in the first ten lectures focus on the first three of these steps – appropriate choice of research methods to meet policy needs, careful compilation of relevant information, and correct interpretation of results.

In policy analysis, the written and verbal communication of results is equally as important as the process of analysis to obtain high quality results. If analysts cannot communicate their results well, their work is unlikely to have much influence on policy decisions. Effective policy advisors have to be both good analysts and convincing salespeople.

There is a close linkage between effective communication and sensible choice of research design. The more complicated the research methodology, the more difficult is the task of communicating results and convincing policy-makers of their relevance. The PAM approach is designed to be effective in identifying the impacts of policies and easy to explain to policy-makers.

The keys to effective communication of analytic results are clarity and brevity. The use of economic jargon and technical language will not be widely understood by many policy-makers and their staffs. Because these people are very busy, they will appreciate concise and accurate communication.

Policy analysts should prepare their communications for an audience of non-economists who are likely to be suspicious of economic analysis and wary of yielding power to economists. Economists working on the staffs of policy-makers also appreciate receiving communications that focus on policy trade-offs, not on technical sophistication.
Types of Written Communication in Policy Work

- Policy Papers (15-20 pages)
- Policy Briefs (6-8 pages)
- Policy Summaries (1-2 pages)

In policy analysis, written communications typically fall into one of three categories – policy papers, policy briefs, and policy summaries. Analysts should write all three kinds of policy communications for each set of results. Each type is used differently by policy-makers and their staff members.

Policy papers are the longest form of written communication of policy results. Although it is much easier to write long papers than short ones, effective communication requires brevity. The text of policy papers thus should not normally be longer than 15 to 20 pages. Tables, graphs, and appendices are additional. Often analysts first write a long draft paper that incorporates all of their results. They then trim it back to no more than 20 pages of text and essential results before presenting it to policy-makers.

Policy briefs are the most common, and usually the most effective, form of written communication of policy results. Few busy policy-makers or staffers bother to read a 20-page policy paper carefully. But they are attracted to shorter policy briefs that are well designed and clearly written. A sensible target length for a policy brief is 6 to 8 pages (double-spaced, normal font size, standard margins). Analysts find it taxing to tell their stories in so short a space. But the payoffs in having influence on policy decisions are high.

Policy summaries, sometimes called executive summaries, are the shortest form of communication of policy results – only 1 or 2 pages long. These summary statements cover the same ground as policy papers and policy briefs, but they only highlight the key methods, data, results, and policy implications of the study. A policy summary is intended to advertise the research results and to encourage policy-makers and their staffers to read the longer papers. Because they are the shortest, policy summaries are the most difficult to write.
The purpose of a policy paper is to provide detailed information for staff members of policy-makers. Only rarely do policy-makers take the time to read a policy paper carefully. The policy paper typically serves as a back-up to the central document, the policy brief, to offer clarity on technical and policy questions.

The key rule to follow in writing a policy paper is to make sure that all of the results can be replicated by others. Argumentation in policy-making occurs at several levels. One of those is the technical level. Other analysts must be able to replicate the results in a policy paper to be convinced of their accuracy. Otherwise, they will ignore the analytic results and policy recommendations, and the research will be irrelevant for policy purposes.

The need for clarity and brevity governs the writing of policy papers as it does all written and oral communication of policy results. If an analyst is limited to writing a text of no more than 15 to 20 pages, there is a tendency to want to include results in other ways outside of the text. To curb this impulse, the number of tables or graphs should be limited to between 6 and 10. Appendices should not be used as dumping grounds for text that was cut from a lengthy first draft. Appendices should contain only essential technical material on methods, background, and data.
Policy papers usually have five sections that occur in the following logical order – the methods of analysis, the key methodological and data assumptions, the principal data and sources of information, the empirical results of the analysis, and the major interpretations of results and their implications for policy.

The discussion of methodology should focus on what the analytic approach is and why its application is appropriate to study the policy issue at hand. This section ought to be brief and to the point since few policy-makers have intrinsic interest in economic methodology.

All methods of economic analysis have limitations and require the use of strong assumptions. In most empirical work, some important kinds of data are missing or of questionable accuracy. The section on methodological and data assumptions used in the analysis should highlight the limitations as well as the strengths of the analysis.

Data refer to more than just the numbers used in the empirical analysis. Policy-makers need context to understand the importance of the new results. The section of data and sources of information thus includes relevant historical information as well as discussions of the quality of information used and of fieldwork procedures.

The computational power of micro-computers permits policy analysts to generate large quantities of empirical results. Policy-makers have limited patience as analysts carry out investigations of the sensitivity of results to changes in key assumptions. Only the results central to policy options need to be reported. Less is better.

To be most helpful to policy-makers, analysts need to interpret their results in ways that are understandable and helpful in decision-making. The implications for policy need to focus on the impacts on the winners and losers from various policy actions. Policy decisions are political. Policy-makers have to decide whom to help and harm.
Writing Policy Briefs –
Issues and Methods

- issues (less than 1 page)
  - policies addressed
  - aspects covered
  - policy context

- methods (1 page)
  - logic and appropriateness
  - previous use plus strengths/limitations
  - qualifications

The notes on writing policy briefs are concise because the *PAM* book contains full explanations as well as an example of a policy brief (for a wheat system in Portugal). Those materials should be used in conjunction with this slide and the three following slides.

Policy analysis is about half finished once an analyst has identified clearly what policy question is being addressed. The first section of a policy brief sets out the policy issues to be addressed in less than one page. It covers the policy issues, the specific aspects addressed in the analysis, and the broader policy context (*PAM*, p. 246).

Method is the lifeblood of analysts, but detailed discussion of method is not appreciated by many policy-makers. This one-page section of the policy brief sets out intuitively the logic and appropriateness of the approach used in the study, justifies the method by discussing its application in other policy analyses, and notes the main strengths and limitations of the approach (*PAM*, pp. 246-247).
Most policy-makers enjoy learning about fieldwork, and they are curious about the history of policy. The two-page section on information thus is often the easiest to write. It contains discussions of the empirical data and complementary information used in the study, the key limiting assumptions made, and the historical data that provide the policy context (PAM, p. 247).

Inexperienced policy analysts find the interpretation section the hardest to write. What does it all mean? Helpful interpretation of results requires the ability to sift through masses of output and focus on key policy findings. In these two (or more) pages, the analyst reports the main empirical results, the results of sensitivity analysis (from changing key data, parameters, or assumptions), the meaning for policy, and the qualifications because of limitations in the method or poor or missing data (PAM, p. 248).
Good analysts employ the objectives-strategies-policies-constraints framework (developed in lecture 1 and summarized in lecture 10) to organize their thinking and writing. In only one page, they set out the implications of their results in that framework. They review the policy choices, note the winners and losers from various policies, estimate the size of gains or losses for interest groups, identify the impacts on government objectives (efficiency, income distribution, and security), and sketch the likely magnitudes of trade-offs among objectives (*PAM*, p. 248).

Although policies are carried out at the national level by leaders of sovereign states, policy-makers need to be concerned with the international ramifications of their actions. Developing countries only occasionally are large forces in international commodity or factor markets. But analysts need to summarize in one paragraph the possible trade effects and impacts on world prices as well as implications for factor flows (foreign investment and labor migration). They also should assess whether the policy options are consistent with the country’s obligations to the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and other multilateral and donor organizations (*PAM*, p. 249).

The role of the policy analyst is to assess the likely consequences of alternative policy choices, not to make personal value judgments about those choices (slide 6, lecture 1). Although it can be difficult to maintain objectivity or neutrality, the analyst should leave it to the policy-makers to place weights on objectives and make policy decisions. In a single summary paragraph, the analyst distills the essence of the message – the pros and cons of the policy choices, the main empirical lessons from the study, the analytical contributions of the study to the issues, and the likely consequences of the policy options for the principal interest groups (*PAM*, p. 249).
A policy summary is a radically shortened version of a policy brief. Its topic outline thus is identical to that for a policy brief – issues, methods, information, interpretation, implications of results, international ramifications, and summary (slides 5 through 8).

The purpose of writing a policy summary is to present a quick compilation of the study’s results for very busy policy-makers, policy advisors, or staff analysts. The idea is to distill the results into one short document that highlights the relevance and importance of the study for the policy decision.

Brevity and clarity again are the bywords for a policy summary. If possible, the summary should be limited to only one page so that it will attract the widest readership. At most, the summary should not exceed two pages (double-spaced, normal font size, standard margins). It should not contain any tables or graphs, unless one picture is so dramatic that it is sure to catch the attention of policy-makers.

Clarity is essential to attract the right readers. Busy policy-makers appreciate clear writing. The policy summary is an advertisement for the policy brief (and possibly also the policy paper). Policy-makers are likely to assume that a well-written policy summary is a good indication of clear communication in the longer policy documents as well.

Slide 11
Once the preparation of written documents – a policy paper, a policy brief, and a policy summary – is completed, the materials needed for verbal communication follow in a straightforward manner.

If the necessary equipment is available, **PowerPoint presentations can be a very effective means of verbal communication**. If not, the analyst relies solely on carefully prepared handouts. The handouts include the key slides from the PowerPoint materials. It is helpful to distribute these handouts whether or not PowerPoint is actually used in the presentation.

The PowerPoint slides should follow directly from the policy brief and focus on the seven topics covered there – issues, methods, information, interpretation, implications of results, international ramifications, and summary (slides 5 through 8). If time is short, coverage can be restricted to presenting the method, a summary of the principal results, and the key implications for policy of the study.

Since the format is identical to that used in the policy brief, the analyst only needs to create PowerPoint slides for each of the seven categories of topics. The main tables and graphs can be transferred into PowerPoint slides. **It generally is helpful to prepare handouts of all the PowerPoint materials** – the slides with text in outline or multiple slide format and the tables and graphs copied separately.

Slide 12
Verbal Communication – Focus and Versatility

- focus – reach audience
  - stress results and implications for government and interest groups
  - keep technical details in reserve

- versatility – be flexible
  - need to prepare differing oral presentations for sessions of 1/4, 1, and 2 hours
  - plan half of time for discussion

A good policy analyst needs to be able to reach his or her audience effectively. It usually is best to expect that policy-makers and their staffs will be most interested in the implications of policy options for interest groups and government agencies. Too much emphasis on method, data, and results can be ineffective in communicating with policy-makers. But occasionally the audience becomes engaged in technical issues and turns the conversation in that direction. Hence, it is prudent to prepare extra slides – not to be shown in the standard presentation – that contain technical details.

Successful verbal communication also depends on versatility of the presenter. It is not unusual for a high-ranking policy-maker to set up a short appointment, say 15-20 minutes, with the policy analyst. If the presentation goes very well and engages the interest of the policy-maker, that appointment might stretch out or another could be set for later that day. To maintain full flexibility, a well-prepared analyst makes at least three different versions of his/her PowerPoint presentation – one of 15-20 minutes for a very short meeting, a second of about 45 minutes to an hour, and a third for up to two hours. For any length of presentation, it is essential to plan to devote at least half the time to discussion.

Slide 13
Experience shows that there are seven keys to success in presenting the results of policy analysis. These keys apply equally whether the communications are written or verbal. They refer to the attitude, demeanor, and presentational style of the policy analyst.

Clarity is essential for non-technical policy-makers to understand the analytical results.

Brevity in presentation saves time and demonstrates a deep understanding of the policy issues.

Accuracy in carrying out the study and in interpreting its results convinces other technical analysts.

Honesty in identifying crucial assumptions or weak data and interpreting results provides credibility.

Straightforwardness in presentational style and avoidance of jargon aids the clarity of the results.

Confidence in one’s ability to analyze and to identify policy trade-offs strengthens the presentation.

Humility in recognizing the limits of economic analysis heightens the validity of other perspectives and makes listeners more open to yours.