



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

PROGRAM

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The concept of program carries considerable weight in the present-day rhetoric of public policy analysis and the evaluation of government action. The concept is not a new one and, in adapting to changing circumstances and institutions, it has evolved to cover entities and situations that are not necessarily homogenous. The etymological roots of the term program can be traced back to ancient Greece, where the word *programma* meant a publicly written message (literally, something that was written [-*gramma*] beforehand [*pro*-]). The word was fairly rare before the dawn of the 19th century, but it has gradually evolved into a key neologism over the past several decades. The concept generally refers to organized action involving a number of linked components and intended to meet specific objectives by mobilizing the appropriate resources for taking action in a given context (institutional, social, temporal, geographic, etc.). Reflecting the modernization of public administrations and the focus on results-based public management, the concept of program has taken a prominent place in fiscal reform, program evaluation and public policy.

The fiscal reforms undertaken by public administrations in most Western countries during the 1970s were based on an approach known by the initialism PPB, standing for planning, programming and budgeting. This approach was intended to optimize budgetary decision-making within the context of a given system, with the program playing a crucial role in the rationalization of the budget process. A budgetary program may be defined as a framework linking specific objectives (outputs) and needs with given means (inputs) and projected outcomes. In this perspective, programs are part of a three-level pyramid consisting of interdependent structures that shape government action as a whole. The three levels are:

- First, a superstructure that constitutes a strategic level dealing with missions, fields and public policy sectors (economic, social, educational/cultural, governance-related, etc.);
- Next, an intermediate structure that represents an organizational level covering programs and elements of programs related to the missions, fields and policy sectors identified in the superstructure;
- Lastly, an infrastructure that is an operational level for programs, which are thereby organized into activities, projects and operations implemented in the context of government action.

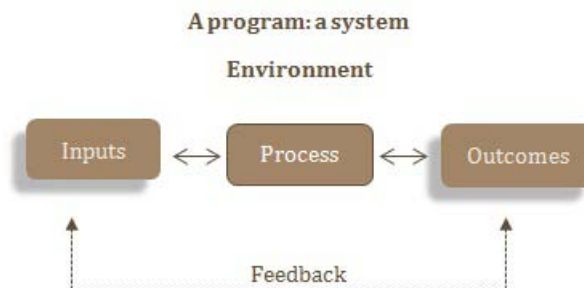
The field of program evaluation has also been instrumental in shaping and inflecting the concept of program. Program evaluation consists in applying a systematic assessment procedure, based on techniques for the creation of knowledge, with a view to appraising and improving the design,

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implementation, efficacy and efficiency of programs (Chen, 2005). In this perspective, the program is defined as a coherent, explicit framework of action, structured around objectives, accompanied by activities and endowed with resources (human, material, digital, financial, etc.), with the ultimate goal of offering products or services intended to resolve a problem and satisfy the needs of a given population in a well-defined spatial and temporal context. In order for a program to succeed and be perpetuated, it must become a living, dynamic entity that meets two essential challenges (Chen, 2005, 3). Internally, it must be capable of effectively transforming inputs into the desired outputs and outcomes, so that a specific situation changes or a given problem is solved. Externally, it must deal with a continuously shifting environment so as to be able to obtain the resources and mobilize the support required for its operation and survival.

Since programs are influenced by their external environments, they are open systems structured around the following five elements: a) inputs, or resources, b) transformational processes, or productive activities, c) outputs, or results, d) feedback between input and output, and e) an environment defined by social norms, political and economic structures, legislation, pressure groups, social preferences, etc.

Figure 1: Program Logic Model



Source: Chen, 2005.

In public policy analysis, the concepts of project and policy are sometimes erroneously used as synonyms for the notion of program. However, in this area, a project is defined as a framework for action intended to attain certain objectives and carry out specific measures (Godin, 2004, 1058). In project management, “project” is defined as a single, non-repetitive resource-transformation process designed to achieve a particular output that corresponds to one or more specific objectives and carried out within certain budgetary, material, human and temporal constraints (O’Shaughnessey, 1992). A program is distinguished from a project by its broader scope, the heterogeneous nature of its stakeholders and by planning that must take into account several organizational requirements associated with various administrations.

In general, a program may consist of a number of projects and activities, while a public policy may comprise different programs. A public policy is simply a general statement, or statement of principle, indicating the guidelines adopted by a given organization in a particular sector to direct collective action (what is to be done or not done). Public policy is a heterogeneous concept, inasmuch as some of its components are related to means, while others are linked to ends (Berretta, 1975). The term “policy” is sometimes used incorrectly to designate programs (De Villers, 2009).

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This confusion may arise from the fact that the five components of an open system (presented in Figure 1) are present in both programs and policies (Chen, 2005). The universe of public policies is often more far-reaching than that of programs. Public policy can be said to refer to activities that, evolving over time, are directed towards solving public problems in a given environment on the part of political actors in a structured power relationship (Lemieux, 2002).

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