

# Integration and Implementation Insights

## Research resources for understanding and acting on complex real-world problems

### What makes government policy successful?

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**Community member post by Jo Luetjens, Michael Mintrom and Paul 't Hart**

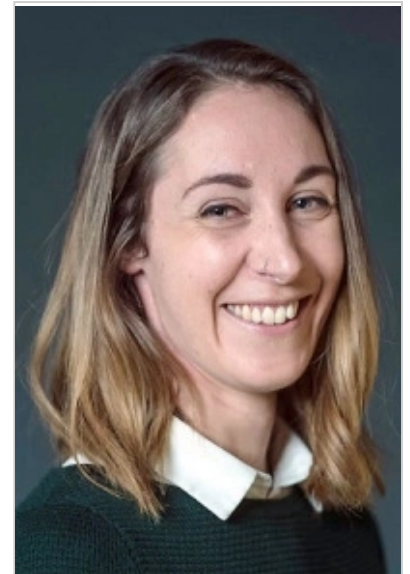
There is considerable pressure on researchers to show that their work has impact and one area in which impact is valued is government policy making. But what makes for a successful government policy? What does it take to achieve striking government performance in difficult circumstances or the thousands of taken-for-granted everyday forms of effective public value creation by and through governments?



Michael Mintrom  
([biography](#))

We used four dimensions to assess levels of success:

- Successful programmatic performance is about designing smart programs that will really have an impact on the issues they are supposed to tackle and delivering those programs in such a manner that they produce social outcomes that are valuable.
- Successful process management relates to how policy design, decision-making and delivery are organised and managed, and whether these processes contribute to not only the policy's effectiveness and efficiency but also to the sense of procedural justice among key stakeholders and the wider public.
- Successful attainment of political legitimacy of a policy involves the extent to which both the social outcomes of policy interventions and the manner in which they are achieved are seen as appropriate by relevant stakeholders and accountability forums.



Jo Luetjens ([biography](#))

- Successful endurance is about maintaining high performance and legitimacy over time through embedded learning in program (re)design and delivery.

We commissioned 20 up-close, in-depth case-study accounts of the genesis and evolution of stand-out public policy accomplishments in Australia and New Zealand across a range of sectors and challenges (Luetjens et al., 2019). Our case studies threw up six recurrent patterns of policy craftwork.

1. Successful public policies tend to address a problem that was well defined and broadly acknowledged at the outset of the policy development process.

For example, Australia's Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) responded to a strong desire to expand the number of school-leavers attending university but was devised in such a way that the flow of benefits was not skewed towards more privileged groups in society.

2. Successful policies rested on conceptually coherent, evidence-informed advice which also paid attention to implementation realities. They were not made 'on the run' but carefully developed, debated, and refined over a period of time.

For example, the economic reforms in New Zealand in the 1980s were propelled by Treasury advice that was devised over a lengthy period and in a way that placed significant weight on intellectual coherence.

3. Champions and stewards are key, not just during the design and decision-making phase, but equally critically during the implementation phase.

A powerful example of this is provided by the New Zealand case of Treaty of Waitangi Settlements. Here, a policy position asserted by a Labour Government was maintained by the incoming National Government. It was steady leadership of the responsible Minister in that government that was crucial to forming and embedding its institutions and processes. This ministerial stewardship continued for years despite the policy frequently being the focus of public disquiet about the cost to tax payers.

4. Astute policy advocates have their bottom drawers well stocked so that their proposed policies can be fitted to the crisis of the hour.

For example, gun control schemes had been in development in Australia for quite some time, but only when a horrendous mass shooting occurred in Tasmania was there a political impetus to adopt them. The policy response in Australia to the HIV / AIDS epidemic represents another instance of a crisis serving as a lever to create momentum for nascent but hitherto not yet influential policy communities and policy paradigms.

5. Virtually all policies we studied survived changes of government from leadership by the party that gave it initial support to a party that once opposed it.

New Zealand's Nuclear Free policy offers a good illustration. In 2007, on the twentieth anniversary of the law, the National Party's spokesperson for foreign affairs conceded that "the retention of this legislation that is called iconic, and that is symbolic of our independence of thought and judgment in international affairs, is not in question" – a far cry from that party's vociferous opposition to it back in 1987.

6. Implementation challenges dog any major policy initiative, but when policymakers persevere, learn from experience, and adjust their approaches accordingly, they may reap the benefits.



Paul 't Hart ([biography](#))

In the case of efforts to make Melbourne a more liveable city, there were various challenges which meant that implementation occurred in a slow, incremental fashion. Yet, when people started to see the benefits of the implementation efforts, assessments of the overall initiative grew far more positive. Likewise, the introduction of water markets in Australia had its fair share of frustrations. Indeed, some of those frustrations remain, but overall this effort has now come to be viewed as making the best of a bad situation.

Understanding what makes policy successful can help researchers more effectively plan the questions and issues they investigate, as well as to be more savvy about their interactions with policy makers and the policy process.

What has your experience been with successful policy making and the role that research plays in identifying and fostering it?

**To find out more:**

Luetjens, J., Mintrom, M. and 't Hart, P. (eds.) (2019). *Successful Public Policy: Lessons From Australia and New Zealand*. ANU Press: Canberra, Australia (Online – open access):

<https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/anzsog/successful-public-policy>

(<https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/anzsog/successful-public-policy>).

**Biography:** Jo Luetjens is a doctoral candidate at the Utrecht University School of Governance in the Netherlands. Her research interests include efforts to improve public sector performance and efficiency, the politics of policy reform and successful change management.

**Biography:** Michael Mintrom PhD is professor of Public Sector Management at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. He holds a joint appointment as the Monash Chair of ANZSOG (Australia and New Zealand School of Government), where he serves as Academic Director of the Executive Master of Public Administration degree. His recent research has examined policy entrepreneurship, teamwork in the policy process, the creation of organisational cultures of excellence, and the assessment of public policies as investments.

**Biography:** Paul 't Hart PhD is professor of public administration at the Utrecht University School of Governance and the Netherlands School of Public Management in The Hague. His research interests include highly successful public policies, organisations and collaborations, political and public service leadership, crisis politics and crisis governance, and political-administrative relations.

## 5 thoughts on “What makes government policy successful?”

1. **josephguillaume** says:  
[June 13, 2019 at 10:11 pm](#)

In a sense, these six recurrent patterns read like ideal conditions for policy that are often not attainable. There's also the issue that looking at successful cases is subject to survival bias. I would be interested in your thoughts – how important is it to explicitly work on putting these conditions in place – possibly avoiding enacting policies that have not been developed in these

conditions, vs simply doing one's best and hoping that all the elements will come together on time? How should policy be approached given that it is at least uncertain whether optimal conditions can be put in place within the resources and time available?

[Reply \(/2019/06/11/successful-government-policy/?replytocom=26130#respond\)](#)

2. **Dr. Steve** says:  
[June 11, 2019 at 10:40 pm](#)

I'm curious what you mean by "conceptually coherent" advice?

[Reply \(/2019/06/11/successful-government-policy/?replytocom=26017#respond\)](#)

- **paulthart88** says:  
[June 11, 2019 at 11:15 pm](#)

'Conceptually coherent' is perhaps a rather clunky label for what we tried to express, namely that in quite a few of the case there was what Jim Collins would call a 'hedgehog idea' at the core of the proposed program or reform. In other words: a guiding concept, a core belief/aspiration etc.

[Reply \(/2019/06/11/successful-government-policy/?replytocom=26019#respond\)](#)

3. **Paul 't Hart** says:  
[June 11, 2019 at 5:12 pm](#)

Thanks for your kind words. We would be delighted to one day include the analytical/evaluative perspective of 'policy success' and apply it to identify pockets of excellent policy design as well as implementation within the Global South. In a forthcoming book (with Oxford University Press, also free online open access – see further details on my research team's website [successfulpublicgovernance.com](http://successfulpublicgovernance.com)) in September 2019, we present 13 cases from around the world, including Brazil's Bolsa Familia program, but we feel there is much more to be mined here.

[Reply \(/2019/06/11/successful-government-policy/?replytocom=26001#respond\)](#)

4. **Kilber Garcia del Aguila** says:  
[June 11, 2019 at 12:33 pm](#)

Buen articulo, tuve la oportunidad de participar en un gobierno regional en mi país Perú, y he visto con sinceridad, la no prioridad de implementar las políticas públicas que han sido formuladas por los gobiernos nacionales. La centralización del poder absoluto y la falta de un proceso de descentralizador retrasan el proceso, en la culminación de la implantación. Ese es el dilema de siempre se deja de lado; y cada gobierno de turno, lo ve a su manera y de acuerdo a sus intereses de gobierno y así pasan los años. Los problemas ganan a las políticas públicas y muchas veces actuamos como bomberos apagando incendios. Tuve la oportunidad de visitar el Asia en especial Corea del Sur y conocer de cerca sus políticas públicas del Estado y se actúa con disciplina en su implantación y de generación en generación. Felicitaciones a ustedes por este buen articulo y estoy para colaborar con ustedes.

Addition by Gabriele Bammer: Google translate renders this as:

Good article, I had the opportunity to participate in a regional government in my country Peru, and I have seen with sincerity, the non-priority of implementing public policies that have been formulated by national governments. The centralization of absolute power and the lack of a decentralization process delay the process, in the completion of the implementation. That is the dilemma of always left aside; and each government in turn, sees it in its own way and according to its government interests and thus the years pass. The problems win over public policies and many times we act as firefighters putting out fires. I had the opportunity to visit Asia, especially South Korea, and to learn

about its public policies of the State and to act with discipline in its implementation and from generation to generation. Congratulations to you for this good article and I am here to collaborate with you.

[Reply \(/2019/06/11/successful-government-policy/?replytocom=25981#respond\)](/2019/06/11/successful-government-policy/?replytocom=25981#respond)

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