

Handbook of  
**Public Policy  
in Malaysia**

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# Handbook of Public Policy in Malaysia

SHARIFAH MARIAM ALHABSHI  
SHAKILA YACOB

*Specially for Tun M,*

*Tabarakallah  
Happy digesting,*

*Shakila*

SHAKILA YACOB

2025

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# Contents

|                         |     |
|-------------------------|-----|
| List of Tables          | i   |
| List of Figures         | ii  |
| iii. Preface            | iii |
| iv. Purpose of Handbook | vii |

## PART 1

|  |          |
|--|----------|
| <b>CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC POLICY MAKING</b>             | <b>1</b> |
| 1.1 Types of Policy Needs.....                                 | 2        |
| 1.2 Policy Preparation.....                                    | 4        |
| 1.2.1 Determine the Issue.....                                 | 5        |
| 1.2.2 Determine the Actions Required.....                      | 6        |
| 1.2.3 Propose the Actions.....                                 | 6        |
| 1.2.4 Steps in Policy Preparation.....                         | 7        |
| 1.2.5 Policy Assessment.....                                   | 8        |
| 1.2.6 Finalising the Report.....                               | 8        |
| 1.3 References.....  | 8        |
| <br>   |          |
| <b>CHAPTER 2: TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES WITH SIMPLE APPLICATION</b> | <b>9</b> |
| 2.1 Introduction.....  | 11       |
| 2.2 Level 1: Understanding the Study - Brainstorming.....      | 11       |
| 2.2.1 Framing the Problem: Mind Mapping.....                   | 11       |
| 2.2.2 Framing the Problem: Bull's eye diagramming.....         | 12       |
| 2.2.3 Framing the Problem: Scenario Planning.....              | 14       |
| 2.2.4 Theory of Change.....                                    | 14       |
| 2.2.5 5 Whys.....  | 18       |
| 2.2.6 Fishbone Diagram or Technique.....                       | 20       |
| 2.3 Level 2: Identification of Stakeholders.....               | 22       |
| 2.3.1 Stakeholders Mapping.....                                | 22       |
| 2.3.2 Ecosystem Mapping.....                                   | 22       |
| 2.4 Level 3: Data and Information.....                         | 25       |
| 2.4.1 Introduction.....  | 25       |
| 2.4.2 Data and Information Collection.....                     | 25       |
| 2.4.3 Data Utilisation Tools.....                              | 27       |
| 2.4.4 Forecasting.....   | 27       |
| 2.4.5 Data Interpretation.....                                 | 27       |
| 2.4.6 SWOT.....  | 29       |
| 2.4.7 Data Visualisation.....                                  | 30       |
| 2.4.8 Conclusion.....  | 30       |
| 2.5 References.....  | 31       |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>CHAPTER 3: PUBLIC POLICY PAPERS</b>   | <b>33</b>  |
| 3.1 Position Paper.....  | 34         |
| 3.1.1 <i>Format of a Position Paper</i> .....  | 34         |
| <i>Sample 1</i> .....  | 35         |
| <i>Sample 2</i> .....  | 39         |
| <i>Sample 3</i> .....  | 41         |
| 3.2 Discussion Paper.....  | 46         |
| 3.2.1 <i>Format of a Policy Discussion Paper</i> .....                                   | 46         |
| <i>Sample 1</i> .....  | 47         |
| <i>Sample 2</i> .....  | 51         |
| 3.3 Policy Brief.....  | 54         |
| 3.3.1 <i>Basic Structure of a Policy Brief</i> .....                                     | 54         |
| <i>Sample 1</i> .....  | 56         |
| <i>Sample 2</i> .....  | 62         |
| <i>Sample 3</i> .....  | 67         |
| 3.4 Policy Paper.....  | 71         |
| 3.4.1 <i>Basic Structure of a Policy Paper</i> .....                                     | 71         |
| <i>Sample 1</i> .....  | 76         |
| <i>Sample 2</i> .....  | 83         |
| 3.5 Conclusion.....  | 91         |
| <br>   |            |
| <b>PART 2</b>  |            |
| <b>CHAPTER 4: THE PRACTICE OF POLICY-MAKING IN MALAYSIA</b>                              | <b>93</b>  |
| 4.1 Issues Initiated Through Cabinet Orders.....   | 96         |
| 4.1.1 <i>Issues Derived from Administrative Processes at the Ministerial Level</i> ..... | 97         |
| 4.2 Approaching Ministries for Research Opportunities.....                               | 98         |
| 4.3 Conclusion.....  | 102        |
| 4.4 References.....  | 103        |
| <br>   |            |
| <b>CHAPTER 5: PREPARING ACADEMICIANS TO WORK WITH GOVERNMENT</b>                         | <b>105</b> |
| 5.1 Academics and Policymakers .....   | 105        |
| 5.2 Train Academics to Engage with Policy Officials .....                                | 113        |
| 5.3 How Academics Can Engage with Policymakers .....                                     | 114        |
| 5.4 Reward Policy Engagement.....  | 115        |
| 5.5 References.....  | 116        |
| <br>   |            |
| <b>CONCLUSION</b>  | <b>117</b> |

# List of Tables

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <b>Table 1</b> : Policy Level Needs.....                                | 2  |
| <b>Table 2</b> : Examining the Issue of Child Obesity using 5Ws 1H..... | 17 |
| <b>Table 3</b> : Selected Examples of Public Policies.....              | 94 |
| <b>Table 4</b> : Selected Think Tanks .....                             | 95 |
| <b>Table 5</b> : Research Section of Select Ministries .....            | 99 |

# List of Figures

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Figure 1</b> : Three-tier Planning Horizon.....   | 4   |
| <b>Figure 2</b> : Steps and Tools in Policy Analysis.....  | 10  |
| <b>Figure 3</b> : Problem Framing: Mind Mapping.....   | 12  |
| <b>Figure 4</b> : Problem Framing: Bull's Eye Diagramming.....   | 13  |
| <b>Figure 5</b> : Theory of Change: Breaking Dependency on Middlemen<br>to Break Poverty Cycle and Decrease School-drop-out..... | 15  |
| <b>Figure 6</b> : Application of Fishbone.....   | 21  |
| <b>Figure 7</b> : Stakeholders Framework for Older Adults' Mobility and<br>the Built and Social Environments.....                | 22  |
| <b>Figure 8</b> : Drawing the Ecosystem.....   | 23  |
| <b>Figure 9</b> : PESTEL Analysis in Brief.....  | 28  |
| <b>Figure 10</b> : SWOT Analysis of the internal and External Conditions<br>of Waste Management in a Kuala Lumpur Suburb.....    | 30  |
| <b>Figure 11</b> : Types of Policy Papers.....   | 33  |
| <b>Figure 12</b> : Ministries and Agencies.....  | 100 |
| <b>Figure 13</b> : Common Decision-making Approach used by<br>Public and Private organisations.....                              | 107 |
| <b>Figure 14</b> : Profile of an Academician.....  | 110 |

## **i. Preface**

Public policy is a widely discussed topic, whether it is in the context of politics, economics, health, or education, among others. The debates centre on the general shortcomings of government, particularly in the provision of goods and services to the public. Regardless of a person's social status, they are aware of what is lacking and what the government should offer them. As a result, public policy should not be neglected or dismissed because it plays a major role in everyone's day-to-day existence.

Public policy aims to benefit people, but it is a complex process influenced by a number of factors and actors. This means that the formation of public policy is difficult and must consider a wide range of issues to be understood and accepted by citizens. Any policy that is created must consider the fundamental elements of society to ensure that the policy outcome serves the best interests of the people in the country. In Malaysia, public policies are tailored to the country's political and social structure, while taking into account its multiethnic and multicultural nature. However, ensuring that policy outcomes serve the interests of the people is challenging; it requires intricate thinking, analysis, and evaluation. For instance, improving youth employability involves addressing multiple interconnected factors, including upskilling, curriculum change, mindset shifts, industrial engagement, and more.

Policymakers must also have answers on how to solve these issues. Answering the "how" question is difficult; it cannot be done in silos. It is, however, difficult to persuade government bodies to collaborate and cooperate; this is simply the nature of government institutions in many countries. Furthermore, policy formulation necessitates listening to a wide range of opinions and ideas to determine whether policy solutions are feasible, implementable, and sustainable. Civil servants, serving as both the ears and voice of the public, should not only collaborate with external consultants but also engage with researchers who assert that a substantial portion of their government funding relies on ministry support. It is imperative for civil servants

to demonstrate that policymaking in Malaysia is not solely under the control of the executive branch.

According to some authors, such as Painter (2004), the country's system of government is dominated by the executive, and any formally inclusive policy process is hampered by the executive's control with little resistance from society or states. Hunter (2013) goes on to say that Malaysian public policy is top-down and made behind closed doors. Furthermore, there are insufficient checks and balances, resulting in an increase in power concentration within the executive (Kanapathy & Hazri, 2013). This viewpoint may not be entirely correct. Public officials, particularly senior civil servants, are the backbone of policy formulation in Malaysia. Even in environments where norms of separating policy and operations prevail, agencies' involvement in policy formation is relatively widespread.

Policy formulation by agencies can take many forms, including developing policy proposals, drafting laws and regulations, commenting on draft laws to assess the practicality of policy proposals, evaluating existing policies, or formulating programmes or rules as part of the agency's formal sphere of authority. Civil servants play a crucial role in the policymaking structure, classified as either supplementary or secondary. Without them, the primary policymakers would be at a significant loss. Ministers and other official policymakers often lack the in-depth knowledge of the ministries they lead. Consequently, they rely heavily on the expertise and guidance of civil servants, particularly senior ones, to offer realistic and implementable solutions to various issues. Civil servants in Malaysia have largely played a role in formulating policies, and they have the necessary specialised expertise. They also implement relevant measures, thus bear heavy responsibilities and are accountable for all actions taken.

The institutional systems in place must permit civil servants to discharge their functions in an efficient and accountable manner for a variety of reasons including efficient public service delivery,

innovation and improvement, and crisis management. Resource limitations, ineffective use of IT, political interference, development silos, and power centres are some factors that have contributed to the less-than-optimal functioning of the machinery of administration and sound policy formulation and implementation. All these have resulted in the declining effectiveness of public policies.

Poor policies also come about because there is an absence of a structured approach in the public service to use input from the rakyat and civil society organisations (CSOs). Although most government agencies solicit feedback from the public, the focus is on the quality of their services. Such feedback is used to improve their service delivery and is generally not filtered into the policymaking process. This contributes to the rakyat's wrath as public policies fail to address their concerns and needs adequately.

With public policies being increasingly criticised, universities are well placed to play a role in sharing unbiased, evidence-based information to support better policymaking. As neutral agents, universities can help by acting as a bridge between the rakyat, CSOs, and public service organisations. They are rich storehouses of knowledge and expertise in many different fields and disciplines thus equipped to conduct studies that could improve policy and decision-making.

Universities and academics are generally less familiar with the workings of government agencies and procedures. Exposure to government operations and processes will allow them to align their research objectives with current policy needs and priorities. This handbook has been designed to help academics grasp the essentials of policymaking in government agencies. It is also expected to facilitate effective dialogue between various stakeholders, including the rakyat (citizens) and civil society organisations (CSOs).

The handbook is divided into two parts. Part I provides an overview of public policy and the politics surrounding policymaking — comprising three chapters dealing with what is public policy, how policies are developed and types of policy papers that are prepared. Chapter 1 highlights the fundamentals of public policy and the politics of

polycymaking. Chapter 2 presents an account of how any given policy is formulated, and the various tools and techniques used in the preparation of policy studies are detailed in Chapter 3. Part II focuses on public polycymaking in Malaysia, the academic environment and how new and efficient practices in research could complement polycymaking in the government sector. Chapter 4 deals with polycymaking in Malaysia, specifically how an issue gets to be addressed. Chapter 5 offers suggestions on how academics could best collaborate with the government. The final chapter concludes.

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Kanapathy, V., & Hazri, H. (2013). Political economy dimension of a middle income trap: Challenges and opportunities for policy reform (Malaysia). Retrieved June 21, 2024, from <http://www.econ.chula.ac.th/public/publication/books/pdf/Political%20Economy%20Dimension%20of%20aMiddle%20Income%20Trap%20Malaysia.pdf>

Hunter, M. (2013). Who makes public policy in Malaysia? *New Mandala*. Retrieved June 22, 2024, from <https://www.tnp.no/norway/global/3540-who-makes-public-policy-inmalaysia>

## ii. Purpose of the Handbook

The objective of this handbook is to guide the academic researcher through the maze of rules (written and unwritten) implemented by actors that form the government. At the outset, it is necessary to note that there are many levels of academic researchers, ranging from the young, unexposed academic to those with years of experience beyond the dominion of a university. This fact was confirmed during our study visits and interviews with various stakeholders, from ministries to agencies to academicians (both junior and senior). We learned that academicians played different roles at many different levels. Some are active political advisors closely involved with NGOs, and many are consultants. Notwithstanding this fact, the handbook is a vital source that provides practical wisdom that must be shared—as a guide for new academic researchers and a counter-reference for experienced researchers.

Undeniably, many academic researchers have strong incentives to influence policymaking, but few have provided impactful input. However, based on our interviews with scholars and practitioners, many affirm that their inputs are not publicised but internalised by the grant-providing agencies. The situation is not unique to Malaysian researchers; a similar situation exists in the United Kingdom, as outlined by the Institute for Government.

Academic evidence and expertise can inform and improve government policy, but many academics find it difficult to contribute to policy making. As a result, policy influence too often remains the preserve of the few – particularly in central government. This is a waste (Sasse and Haddon, 2019)

Decision-makers and policymakers met by our team claimed that an academic researcher is quick to conclude failure to show the impact or consequences of policy implementation on a targeted group. The level of fuzziness lies here. Policy implementation is generally undertaken by the government and selected others to achieve the goals and objectives

articulated in policy statements. This means the academic researcher (unless invited) is not part of the adoption and implementation team. The ordinary academic researcher may not know the usefulness of their policy suggestions. An experienced, well-connected researcher may be able to guide the implementation process.

It is difficult to fault the system. Public policymaking is known to be complex. Rightly defined as “whatever governments choose to do or not to do” (Dye, 1992, cited in Anderson, 2003), public policy is also defined as “a purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern” (Anderson, 2003). Indeed, academic researchers must know these actors because they can make a difference.

According to Anderson (2003), official policymakers possess the legal authority to engage in the formulation of public policy. Those involved in this category are the legislators, the executive, the administrators, and the judiciary. Each of these individuals is mandated to perform specific responsibilities, and it comes with the power to do or not do. They are actors who occupy formal public positions and political offices, and serve as actual policymakers.

In Malaysia, policymaking takes place at the cabinet level (involving the executive and legislators) and within the civil service. Unlike the latter, the executive enjoys full discretionary power, while the civil servants are bound by guidelines etc. A civil servant has two masters: the politicians, and the people - he/she must choose which one to listen to, who to choose and why to choose are all written in the laws, laid out in black and white. The institutional systems in place must permit civil servants to discharge their functions in an efficient and accountable manner for a variety of reasons. As the system is bound by laws, rules, and regulations, a civil servant should adhere to them to ensure they are delivering the required goods and services to the public. Problems happen when civil servants overlook/ignore these laws, rules, and regulations. Law making involves legislature, executive, judiciary, and administrators.



Government-sponsored research must place the government in the centre. This need makes the research exercise cumbersome for several reasons. Firstly, making appointments with decision-makers and policymakers, commonly referred to as stakeholders, is a painful exercise irrespective of their position. Waiting for an interview can take months or it never happens. Also, there are too many doors to knock on before getting to the right door. In some cases, the right door is not the right person. The right person may have been transferred or retired. The new person often has scanty information. Secondly, due to unknown reasons, most data or information in their keep are considered classified despite the age of the data. Tolerance, therefore, is a must.

Nevertheless, some researchers failed to realise that it is the civil servants who decide on the relevance of research output. An inexperienced

academic researcher may simply oblige the administrators rather than examine the plan and interests of the executive for his/her target group. For example, consider the topic of barter trading in the Sabah waters. This case is more a political agenda of a particular minister than a policy to address an issue. Generally, a study of this nature requires extensive engagement with decision and policy makers to obtain policy evidence. In general, cases in the context of data and information classification, there are guidelines on when it can be opened, or remain classified. For example, discussions carried out in Parliament can be classified forever. The case of Sabah is unique as it has its rulings that cannot be interfered with, even by the federal government.

Overall, this handbook seeks to inform academics and practitioners about the importance of collaboration in formulating effective policies. If policymakers take a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach, collaboration with diverse stakeholders, including academics, is essential for successful and meaningful policies for Malaysia.

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# PART 1

## CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW OF PUBLIC POLICY MAKING

Public policy is a statement of purpose stated by a government about its intention, what it plans to do, and occasionally what it decides not to do. This definition is based on Thomas R. Dye (2017) statement that “public policy is what a government chooses to do and not do.” According to James E. Anderson (2003), making public policy involves many actors who are recognised and accepted by the public. Here, Anderson refers to public officials who have the legal power to formulate policy. However, in some countries, the definition may not be fully applicable because, at the formulation stage of policymaking, other parties are called for input. There are several players at work in the process of public policy. Everyone, from politicians and civil servants to lobbyists and industry representatives, is involved in public policy. These individuals strategise and devise techniques and mechanisms to push their proposed policies through. They accomplish this by publicly advocating for the policies they are aiming to enact, educating both supporters and opponents of the policy in order to acquire greater support, and gathering allies to advocate for a specific issue.

## 1.1 Types of Policy Needs

In government research, it is necessary to include direction, priorities, values, and goals. Hence it is important to look at the various types of policy needs and to understand the responsibilities of the custodian ministry in conceptualising, and finally delivering the policy.

The government assigns the need for policy development or policy review in one of three ways (Table 1).

**Table 1: Policy Level Needs**

| Time  | Policy Development  | Examples   |
|---|---|--|
| Short-term / Urgent.<br>(Change needed in < 1 year) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Annual budget.</li><li>• Stimulus plans to mitigate effects of unexpected events of serious consequence, usually causing public outrage.</li><li>• Requiring immediate and necessary decisions.</li></ul> | Economic stimulus packages such as PRIHATIN.                                       |
| Medium-term<br>(Change within 1 to 5 years)         | ‡ The need to reform /transform existing services /organisations,   | Five-(5) year plans, public sector reform, housing, employment, education, health. |
| Long-term<br>(Change over > 5 years)                | The need to plan ahead to ensure that future populations have access to housing, etc, and to ensure standards are in place to meet emerging needs.  | New Economic Policy, ageing society, climate change.                               |

Note: The policy time frame is based on the Economic Planning Unit's classification.

**Source:** Economic Planning Unit, Malaysia. (2022). Planning horizon. Retrieved November 3, 2024, from <https://www.epu.gov.my/en/economic-developments/economic-management/planning-horizon>

Urgent issues are usually attached to an unexpected event that requires immediate decision-making to resolve, such as pandemics. In this case, the first duty of the custodian ministry, for example, the Ministry of Health, is to study the issue immediately and present the conclusions to the Minister and other relevant ministries for decision-making purposes.

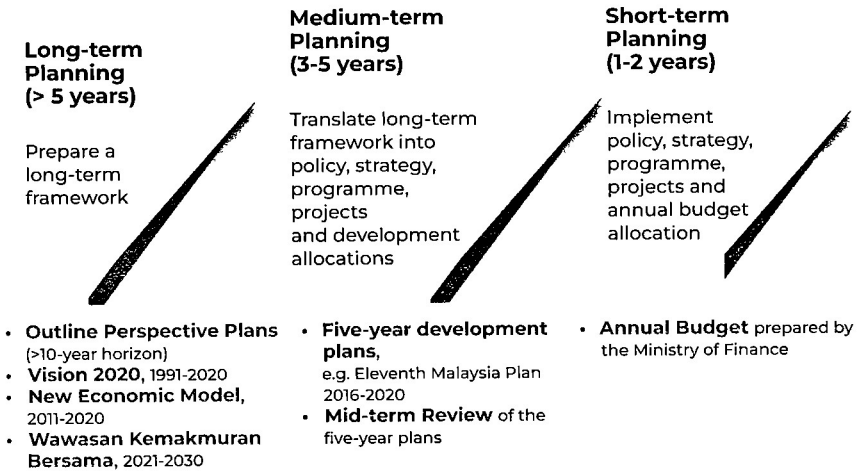
Once a commitment is made by the Minister to act upon the issue, the Ministry must initiate a policy development process to ensure that the commitment is met and study the matter thoroughly to ensure that any possible medium or long-term consequences of the issue are considered and resolved.

Within the medium-term time frame, the ministry may need to act urgently or decisively on formulation of a policy. However, the ministry would need to ensure that a policy making process is initiated within a reasonable time frame.

An example of a medium-term policy need would be public sector reforms. Such an issue may not require immediate action. Still, a policy formulation team would need to initiate a policy preparation process to conduct an in-depth study on the issue and ensure appropriate remedial measures could be implemented within a 1-5-year time frame (Figure 1).

Long-term issues arise when dealing with medium-term issues. The only difference is those policy decisions associated with long-term issues need to be more mindful of the consequences in the future (at least more than three years). An example of such an issue might be the long-term health risks associated with stunting or childhood obesity. While both are valid concerns that need to be tackled in the medium term, the adverse effects associated with these disorders will not likely be felt for another 5-10 years.

## Three-tier Planning Horizon



\*EPU coordinates the preparation of the medium-term development plans

**Figure 1: Three-tier Planning Horizon**

**Adapted:** Economic Planning Unit, Malaysia. (2022). Planning horizon. Retrieved November 3, 2024, from <https://www.epu.gov.my/en/economic-developments/economic-management/planning-horizon>

## 1.2 Policy Preparation

Effective policy development requires a focus on long-term outcomes, the inclusion of robust evidence, careful analysis, and the commitment of stakeholders. For these and many other reasons, policy work is best undertaken based on systematic foundations organised within well-defined stages.

Focus on the observation and analysis of new issues or current trends that may require the need to develop a policy response. Policy preparation is carried out through an analysis of the issue, an assessment of the external environment, and a gathering of evidence. Examine whether the issue requires further analysis in the form of a policy appraisal or if the government should do nothing. The justification should be rapid, completed in a few days, or should not exceed one month;

This groundbreaking handbook is an essential resource for academics, policy students, policymakers, and practitioners navigating the complex landscape of public policymaking in Malaysia. Combining theoretical perspectives with practical insights, it explores the intricate interplay among government actors, academic researchers, and the broader societal context. More than just a manual, this handbook champions collaboration, advocating for a whole-of-nation approach to policymaking. It envisions a future where evidence-based policies are crafted through collective wisdom, ensuring better governance and meaningful outcomes for Malaysia.

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