

## Framing and frameworks

### Reconsidering frames and framing is warranted

We have always found there is an interest in the idea of policy frameworks and how the notion of framing works. It is a difficult area that analysts often lack a firm grasp on. So, it is a topic we have been discussing for as long as we have been reviewing policy work.

The Policy Quality Framework (PGF) sets the standard.<sup>1</sup>

“The Analysis:

- Identifies the analytical frameworks or methodologies used [e.g. cost benefit analysis, human rights analysis, living standards framework, te ao Māori analysis, the Pacific Policy Analysis Tool Kapasa, the gender analysis tool, systems analysis] and their relevance
- Makes the underlying assumptions and any limitations of the chosen frameworks or methodologies clear
- Is of a depth that is proportionate to the scale and importance of the policy issue.”

This Masterclass is a revisit of the area.<sup>2</sup> The earlier version was Masterclass No. 16.<sup>3</sup> We aim to look again at the basics and use them to provide helpful suggestions.

### The issue is the need to simplify reality to develop policy

Framing is a general method of coming to terms with a particular situation. It is a way of making sense of the complexity of the world. So, taking it widely, it is typically a ‘story’ or general analytical description that provides insights into or a way of understanding a specific set of circumstances.

In a policy context, the aim is to bring the particulars of the presenting issue into a wider logical setting – thus opening the door to both understanding what is going on and indicating a way of considering what might be done about it. This can be:

- **Formal** – where the frame is analytical and usually a theoretical construct (typically the application of an academic or scholarly discipline – like the concept of human rights analysis based on international conventions<sup>4</sup>) or
- **Informal** – where there is more of a ‘story’ element to the description. They are often metaphorical or liken the situation to a well-known one. (So, considering the policy issue about Police obtaining DNA samples, one approach was to ask whether it was more like taking a fingerprint or searching a home.)

<sup>1</sup> See PQF – A guide on panels and processes for assessing policy advice papers, Appendix 1 Page 14. <https://www.dpmc.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2024-02/policy-quality-framework-guide-panels-and-processes-feb2024.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Our interest in revisiting the question of how frameworks function in policy advice was stimulated by seeing recent professional teaching material produced by A/Prof.

Amanda Wolf of VUW. This encouraged us to see the framing issue in a wider context.

<sup>3</sup> Masterclass No. 16 Frameworks [https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief\\_16\\_frameworks.pdf](https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_16_frameworks.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, [https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Aid-Prog-docs/Tools-and-guides/Human\\_Rights\\_Analysis\\_Guideline.pdf](https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Aid-Prog-docs/Tools-and-guides/Human_Rights_Analysis_Guideline.pdf)

Whichever is the case, framing is an important step in grappling with the background to developing policy advice.

It seeks to turn the unfamiliar into the (at least somewhat) familiar to facilitate understanding.

It doesn't always happen, but at their best, frames shape how people 'see' social, legal, economic and cultural realities. This helps them make sense of the situation. But taking this step inevitably raises issues.

### The framing process has advantages and disadvantages

Like many analytical devices, framing has a 'good side' and a 'bad side'.

#### Understand the drawbacks of the logic

Awareness of the downside aspects is vital to making the most of framing.

Sensible advisors are always aware that framing works by simplifying reality. Thus, a framework is like a lens that sharpens aspects of the situation by bringing them into focus:

- Diagnoses certain conditions as 'problems.'
- Suggests moral judgements about the actions of agents involved.
- May endorse particular remedies.

In other words, the step toward 'interpreting' the situation can be a move towards assessing it.

#### Ambiguity comes with the territory

Fundamentally, the richness of the real world means it is unlikely that any given situation has only one frame that works – most will have many different ways of untangling the complexity of the position.

Different ways of framing make the same problem situation look different, and while this is potentially valuable, it can have serious consequences for policy development.

We often see policy issues where various groups support different policies based on how they frame the situation.

If the road toll is in question, there are many possible frames – including the idea of this being a multi-factorial issue. But for simplicity in this example, we can look at two single factor frames:

- The deaths are caused by a small number of poor drivers who have fatal accidents and
- It's the state of the roads that were built for lower-powered cars travelling at lower speeds.

And (thanks to the simplicity of the framing), each of these has an obvious matching policy solution flowing from it:

- Tighten up driver testing and develop indicators of poor driving ability to remove the bad drivers from the roads.
- Review the speed limits on busy highways to ensure that the speed restrictions reflect safety needs. In this simple example, the two frames (in story format) flow smoothly through to suggest completely different policies. Such a clash of possible policy causes/solutions can be unhelpful in the process of working up advice.

### So, from this, there are three findings

All this has three practical implications:

- 1 Policy analysts need to understand the policy framework others use to avoid talking past each other.
- 2 Users must understand and communicate the limits of a framework and its strengths.
- 3 Take care with the framing as problem diagnosis and definition flow out of it.

And overall, the conclusion is that all this framing has distinct advantages.

## Policy frameworks underpin good policy

They provide an understandable structure, can link to the theory and evidence, and highlight the focus questions that differentiate good quality policy advice from rhetoric.

**A policy framework helps to provide a logical link between the analysis and policy recommendations.** Policy frameworks provide structured, logical, causal relationships between the concepts, available evidence and policy recommendations. By focusing on causal links, a policy framework highlights possible levers and points for intervention.

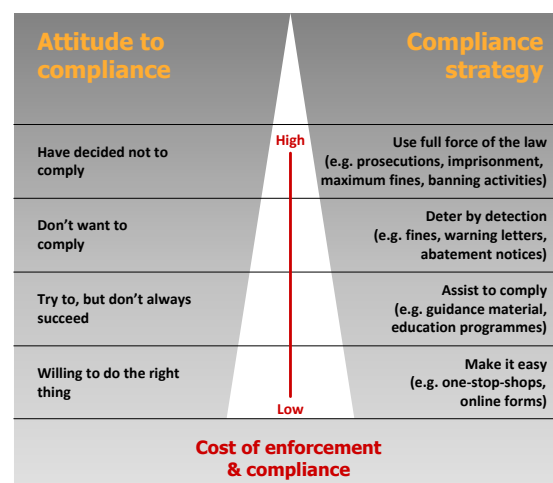
Policy frameworks help focus questions, including:

- How do we best shape and think about an issue?
- How does it work? (Do a + b make c?)
- What are the defining characteristics?
- Where are the possible points of intervention?
- What is the binding constraint?
- What are the critical success factors?

An example of a well-developed and widely used framework is the enforcement pyramid shown below in Figure 1.

This framework has been adopted by numerous enforcement agencies across the OECD that are involved in taxation, other revenue collection, and regulation.

Figure 1 Enforcement framework



Source: Based on Ayres and Braithwaite (1992)<sup>5</sup>

The framework is an application of a more general concept of 'market segmentation'. This splits up large groups into subsets with different behaviours (as defined on the left of Figure 1.)

By looking at subsets of the total population of clients, quite different strategies can be designed to fit the different situations of the subgroups (as listed on the right of Figure 1.)

Like all such frameworks, this one has its weaknesses. A serious one is the difficulty of identifying a customer's subgroup classification so the right treatment can be given. (Though, in many regulatory settings, the behaviour of the agents can be used to broadly self-identify their characteristics.)

Applying the right policy framework to an issue supports the **problem diagnosis** and the selection of the **right policy levers to address the problem**.

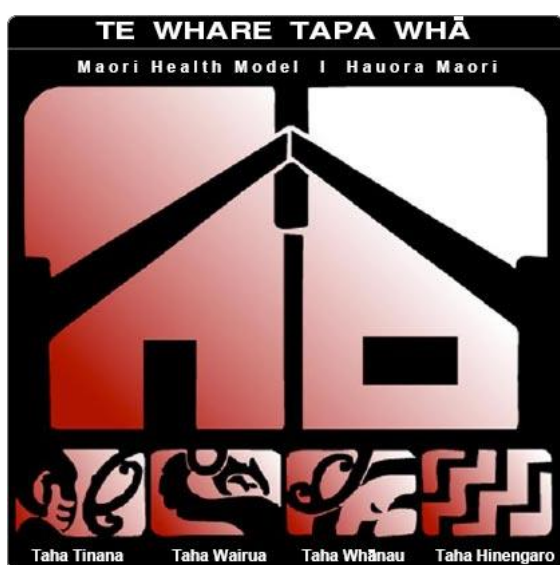
<sup>5</sup> Ayres, Ian, and John Braithwaite. "Designing responsive regulatory institutions." *The Responsive Community* 2, no. 3 (1992): 41-47.

## New Zealand has its own frame – stemming from Te Tiriti

As we have discussed elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> the Treaty provides a way of looking at problems. This has been well advanced in the health area, building on work by Sir Mason Durie. This has subsequently been applied in various ways across different policy areas.<sup>7</sup>

One of his contributions is shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2 The four cornerstones of Māori health**



Source: Ministry of Health Manatū Hauora based on Durie.

The four cornerstones are:<sup>8</sup>

### Taha tinana(physical health)

The capacity for physical growth and development. Good physical health is required for optimal development.

For Māori, the physical dimension is just one aspect of health and well-being and cannot be separated from the aspects of mind, spirit and family.

### Taha wairua (spiritual health)

The capacity for faith and wider communication. Health is related to unseen and unspoken energies.

A traditional Māori analysis of physical manifestations of illness will focus on the wairua or spirit to determine whether damage here could be a contributing factor.

### Taha whānau (family health)

The capacity to belong, care and share where individuals are part of wider social systems. Whānau provides us with the strength to be who we are. This is the link to our ancestors, our ties with the past, the present and the future.

Understanding the importance of whānau and how whānau (family) can contribute to illness and assist in curing illness is fundamental to understanding Māori health issues.

### Taha hinengaro (mental health)

The capacity to communicate, think, and feel the mind and body are inseparable. Thoughts, feelings and emotions are integral components of the body and soul.

This is about how we see ourselves in this universe, our interaction with that which is uniquely Māori and the perception that others have of us.

Te Whare tapa whā was developed in 1984 by Sir Mason Durie.<sup>9</sup> It sees hauora (health and well-being) as a wharenuī (meeting house) – a house of four walls. Each wall represents a dimension of our health, and our connection to the whenua/land forms the foundation.

<sup>6</sup> See Masterclass No 26 at [https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief\\_26\\_te\\_reo\\_maori\\_update\\_2019\\_1.pdf](https://www.nzier.org.nz/hubfs/Masterclasses/Central%20Government/brief_26_te_reo_maori_update_2019_1.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> For instance, application examples are given in Brief 26.

<sup>8</sup> This is edited down from [https://www.health.govt.nz/our-](https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/populations/maori-health/maori-health-models/maori-health-models-te-whare-tapa-wha)

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<sup>9</sup> See more detail at <https://www.hqsc.govt.nz/assets/Our-work/National-trauma-network/Publications-resources/Te-Whare-Tapa-Wha-resource.pdf>

## An example shows how the right framework can unlock better advice

Consider a city facing extensive graffiti problems. This is manifested in the growth of 'crude' murals produced by paint spray cans on accessible display surfaces throughout the CBD.

The policy question is, what might be done about it?

There are a range of policy frameworks with matched solutions potentially applicable here:

- It is the result of young people having too much spare time, so let's set up programmes to offer the target group alternative things to do.
- It is straight out vandalism, so can we restrict the sale of paint spray cans to those who use them legitimately?
- It is a form of creative self-expression by people looking to make their mark publicly – so can we find a positive, creative outlet for these suppressed talents?
- There are various motives underpinning the phenomenon: essentially all of the above – so can we roll out a series of interventions to meet the differing causes?

Obviously, this is a more complicated issue than what is discussed here. Some trials and/or further investigation of the graffiti artists could produce more grounded advice by better reflecting on what is happening.

The main point is that a careful analysis of the framing of the problem can develop more insightful policy advice that should support better decisions.

Policy frameworks are important as they link this issue to a wider logic or experience.

## Policy frameworks are what distinguish robust advice from pure rhetoric and opinion.

They:

- Provide a structure, link the advice to the theory and evidence, and highlight the focus questions.
- Shape the argument and supporting position.
- Take advice away from "Tis/ Tisn't" or "blue is best" type debates.
- Open the door to using other literature and evidence grounded in the same framework.
- Provide a common basis for discussing an issue with others.
- Ground advice in an appropriate theory or logical approach to support the analysis.
- Help define the problem and select from a range of interventions.

## Tips and tricks to help develop and resource a wide suite of frames

Aside from the potential issue of the focus advantage from applying a specific policy framework, usually entailing the loss of other perspectives, the main operational difficulty with framing is building up a broad 'library' of policy frameworks.

Key tips to bear in mind are:

- **Review the available literature, especially what other countries do.** Our problems are ours, but often, there are attributes that others have faced and classified in a framework.
- **Look across our system** – what frames are in use? Every problem is different, but analysts may use frameworks that are widely applicable.

On the other hand, **look across disciplines** for simple, tractable models and stories that are practical.

- **Shop around** – colleagues and other analysts (especially from different backgrounds and with different training) can be a source of unexpected insights.
- **Repurposing structures used in other sectors** is close to the above. This can be especially helpful in difficult cases.
- **KISS** – always use the least demanding framework that fits the situation. But don't be simplistic.
- **Don't rush.** This is a key foundation stone of the policy cycle, as getting the right framework matters.

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