



The Health Policy Process in Vietnam: Going Beyond Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory

Comment on "Shaping the Health Policy Agenda: The Case of Safe Motherhood Policy in Vietnam"

Sumit Kane^{1,2*}

Abstract

This commentary reflects upon the article along three broad lines. It reflects on the theoretical choices and omissions, particularly highlighting why it is important to adapt the multiple streams framework (MSF) when applying it in a socio-political context like Vietnam's. The commentary also reflects upon the analytical threads tackled by Ha et al; for instance, it highlights the opportunities offered by, and raises questions about the centrality of the Policy Entrepreneur in getting the policy onto the political agenda and in pushing it through. The commentary also dwells on the implications of the article for development aid policies and practices. Throughout, the commentary signposts possible themes for Ha et al to consider for further analysis, and more generally, for future research using Kingdon's multiple streams theory.

Keywords: Vietnam, Health Policy, Kingdon's Multiple Streams Theory

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*Correspondence to:

Sumit Kane

Email: s.kane@kit.nl

The article "Shaping the Health Policy Agenda: The Case of Safe Motherhood Policy in Vietnam,"¹ presents an insightful analysis of how the health policy agenda comes to be set. The use of the safe motherhood policy (NPSM) as a case study is particularly relevant and timely as the world, both low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and their development partners alike, reflects upon the last 15 years of efforts to achieve the millennium development goals. This historical analysis of the safe motherhood policy of Vietnam offers valuable lessons for both LMIC actors, and development partners, as we together move towards setting in motion efforts to achieve the newly agreed sustainable development goals (SDGs).²

This commentary reflects upon the article along three broad lines – Reflections on theoretical choices, omissions, and possible opportunities going forward; reflections on the analytical threads tackled in the paper, and possible themes to consider for further development; and finally some reflections on the implications of the paper for development aid policies and practice.

Reflections on Theoretical Choices, Omissions and Possible Opportunities

Theoretically, Ha et al have chosen Kingdon's multiple streams framework (MSF),³ a much used, much tested, and well-established analytical framework for examining the agenda-setting aspect of the NPSM policy process. However, while analysing the NPSM, Ha et al cover ground beyond what Kingdon's MSF fully allows for. A recent revised MSF put forth by Ness⁴ and Ness and Mistretta⁵ argues for the inclusion of institutional factors, referred to as the "policy milieu," into the analytical frame. The policy milieu includes

such institutions as government structures, and governance institutions. In addition, the revised model expands the policy stream into an interactive "policy field" that contains the politics and problem fields. Explicitly taking into account Ness and Mistretta's additions to the MSF would have allowed Ha et al to better unpack the policy milieu, and to present a more compelling account of the NPSM case study in Vietnam. Similarly, there is a large and sophisticated body of work which has critically examined the MSF and its limitations.⁶ Among others, Howlett et al⁷ have proposed an expansion of the MSF so as to allow better linkage with the steps leading to policy settlement, with the other stages of the policy process, and explicit analytical accommodation of "agency, power, ideology, turbulence and complexity" inherent to the policy process. Building on Kingdon's aquatic metaphor, they propose a five streams confluence model wherein the convergence of Kingdon's three streams at the agenda-setting stage is but the first point of confluence of the streams, and the starting for the policy formation process. Howlett et al,⁷ propose that 2 more streams (process and programme streams) join the three agenda-setting streams, and through a potentially turbulent series of confluences lead to – policy formation, decisions on alternative options and ultimately policy settlement through an iterative and negotiated process mediated by agency, power, ideology, and politics of the actors concerned. Since Ha et al examine and discuss the NPSM beyond just the agenda-setting stage, and include a description leading up to the eventual settlement of the NPSM policy in Vietnam, the five streams model proposed by Hewlett et al⁷ would have been a much more useful and flexible heuristic for the analysis.

While indeed the MSF has been empirically tested in many

different contexts^{8,9}; but it has had its share of criticism; one such criticism applies particularly to the Vietnamese context. Bell^{10,11} in his influential work on comparative political theory has questioned the applicability of frameworks that assume western political ideas around law and policy to the East Asian socio-politics, grounded as it is, as he calls, in a broader Confucian culture wherein Confucian ideals of social conduct pervade all aspects of public life, sociality, ethic, and morality. Bell's central argument is that East Asian politics, public policy and decision-making processes are grounded in uniquely Asian understanding of what matters, how much, and how things should be done – he cautions against applying and developing “universal” arguments founded exclusively on the moral argumentation and political experience of Western liberal societies, to the East Asian context. To what extent the various streams of the MSF, the policy milieu, and whether and to what extent the convergence of the three streams were shaped by this broader societal structural context of the Vietnamese society and polity would be a line of inquiry worth developing further.

The article presents a compelling account of the centrality of the Policy Champion (Policy Entrepreneurs – as Kingdon originally referred to them) in getting the NPSM onto the policy agenda; it presents a compelling validation of this particular aspect of MSF. One is in fact almost left hungry for more insight into the personality and modus operandi of the Policy Champion; one also misses an in-depth explication of the material, positional, and relational resources that the Policy Champion marshalled to not merely bring NPSM on to the policy agenda but also to push the policy through. Further explication of, and reflection upon the championing strategies¹² used by the Policy Champion, given the political and cultural context of Vietnam, and the organizational context of Vietnam Ministry of Health, would be a valuable addition to gaining a better understanding of the policy process. Such an analysis could also dwell upon the limitations and risk of relying upon one Policy Champion.¹³ The authors could draw upon the rich literature on public entrepreneurship^{14,15} to cover this ground.

Linked to the above arguments, MSF is a theory that has been inductively derived and developed in specific, particularly, Northern American socio-political contexts. Recent work on MSF highlights that the MSF requires adaptation^{16,17} if it is to be applied to other jurisdictions than what Kingdon had originally in mind.¹⁸ Ha et al in fact make many adaptations to the MSF – adaptations which perhaps indicate the uniqueness of the Vietnamese socio-political context. For instance, the article clearly shows that the policy window was actually opened by changes in the policy stream, and not so much by changes in the politics or problem streams. Similarly, the Policy Champion not only seized the opening in the policy window, but was instrumental in creating the opening, brought the NPSM on to the policy agenda and eventually pushed the policy through. Furthermore, in the context of this case study, the policy networks (or as policy communities as Kingdon called them) appear to have a rather peripheral role in the survival of the idea within the policy stream in Vietnam. Had Ha et al reflected upon why these peculiarities were so, given the Vietnamese socio-political context, the article could have provided valuable additional insight into

the possible applicability of the MSF to similar socio-political and cultural contexts.

In the same vein, the article is conspicuous in its omission of how it applies the Politics stream; this omission prevents Ha et al from exploiting the MSF's full explanatory potential. According to Kingdon's original articulation, the Politics stream refers to three components: 'National mood,' 'Party ideology,' and 'Balance of interests.' The state of these three elements as it relates to the agenda of concern, the policy problem and the possible solutions to the policy problem, needs to be clearly articulated to allow a complete analysis. One then needs to clearly demonstrate what change in the problem or politics stream led to the opening of the policy window, and finally, how and why a 'policy-entrepreneur' succeeded in coupling the streams once the policy window had opened. Ha et al, do the latter well, but by limiting themselves to arguing that the antecedent international and national events and agreements as on safe motherhood as being the only factors that had a bearing on the government's ideas, fall short in fully utilizing the analytical potential offered by the Politics stream. A more thorough application of the Politics stream would have strengthened the analysis, and would have also lent much greater credibility to the article's recommendations.¹⁹

Reflections on the Analytical Threads Tackled in the Paper

The paper dwells into many important analytical strands; these are briefly examined below - and attention is drawn to possibilities for further consideration and reflection.

The case highlights the highly technocratic trajectory of the NPSM policy process; that the Women's Union, an otherwise important public actor in Vietnam, fell to the side during the policy process, is an important signpost within the paper. Why this happened, and whether happening so had any implications eventually – on the nature of the policy, on the implementation of the policy, on the buy-in of various actors into the policy, and effectiveness of the policy, will be worth examining. Further, a reflection into whether this was a one-off event, or whether this was a common situation in public policy and health policy processes at large, would also be worth examining as a broader inquiry into the stewardship and governance of the Vietnamese health system.

That the Policy Champion was so central to bringing the NPSM on to the policy agenda and also in pushing it through, deserves further attention. It is worth exploring further if there is something about the context of Vietnam, its health system, or both, that a champion driven policy change process is more likely to be successful. Such an analysis could then be expanded to more generically reflect upon the typologies of socio-political contexts where this might also be the case - doing so can provide valuable insight to researchers and policy analysts operating in other similar contexts. Similarly, further analysis of the championing strategies used by the policy champion, and why these were effective, can provide policy networks insight into how to effectively operate in the health policy arena in Vietnam.

The paper highlights results achieved on the Maternal Mortality front as a result of implementing the NPSM in Vietnam²⁰; it in many ways showcases the important role of the policy response and the health services implementation of

the policy, in achieving population health outcomes. In doing so, it raises some questions too – does the case somehow challenge the traditional public health wisdom that health services-based responses can only achieve so much, or in fact does it reinforce it given that the Maternal Mortality in remote areas and amongst minorities in Vietnam remained high in spite of the NPSM's implementation. It also raises questions whether the policy development stage could have been done such that equitable improvements could have been made in maternal health outcomes across the country; perhaps through offering formal space to and facilitating active involvement of a diversity of interested and affected actors.

Reflections on Implications for Development Aid Policies

Finally, albeit tacitly, the article offers valuable insight for development and donor policy; it signposts important lessons and potential lines of inquiry for effectiveness of development aid and donor engagement with recipient countries. The article points to the importance of patient and long term donor engagement geared towards earning credibility and legitimacy as key to being able to shape change. The authors point this out in the affirmative, giving the example of the Royal Netherlands Embassy, and contrast it with the approach taken by multilateral agencies. Ha et al also highlight how choosing achievable and feasible policy interventions instead of politically contentious areas to support might help donor agencies, both to achieve results and perhaps also to earn credibility and legitimacy. These insights, while beyond the primary scope of the article, provide valuable guidance about the elusive 'how to' part of effective donor engagement in health and social development.

Ethical issues

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Author declares that he has no competing interests.

Author's contribution

SK is the single author of the paper.

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