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Abstract

Public policy work is hard, especially when one works in developing countries. It is even difficult to define what success looks like, and thus how to manage towards success. Literature helps manage such difficulty, providing studies that define the concept and show how it can be achieved. A core message from such is that success is multi-dimensional, and practitioner need to focus on multiple criteria when doing their policy work. But what dimensions and criteria matter? And do development practitioners really adopt this multi-dimensional view? Tackling such questions, the current paper reviews 45 applied studies from the public policy, project management and development evaluation literatures to see what they identify as key success criteria and if the practical studies (about development evaluation) are in sync with the more academic messages. Reading across all three literatures, I identify 30 potential success criteria in 6 categories or dimensions (program, impact and endurance, capability, political, stakeholder, and process). I find that the development evaluation literature focuses on a narrow set of 7 criteria, mostly in one dimension (program success) as compared to broader perspectives in the other literatures. This suggests that development practitioners have a narrow view on success, which is out of step with academic views on the topic. A conclusion proposes a broader approach for these practitioners.

A story from the field

I teach a case about revenue policy implementation in a fictional developing country called Nomburo (Andrews 2010). It begins with a newly elected President hiring an official called John Mwa to expand the country's tax collection effort. Mwa and his National Revenue Agency (NRA) devise and implement an aggressive strategy to meet most of their goals in the first year of operation, leading the President to declare 'victory over past poor performance'. She soon withdraws the statement, however, as concerns emerge about Mwa's work. Civil society advocates claim that the NRA targeted poorer communities, parliamentarians raise questions about the NRA's aggressive strategy and launch an inquiry into the President's role in approving their work program, and the opposition leader states publicly that "most Presidents serve their people, but this President harasses the people for their money." Concerned about the inquiry, senior NRA staff offer a public apology for how they pursued collections and call for Mwa to resign. Mwa ultimately has no say in this decision, however, and is fired by a President under fire. The NRA collection drive stalls thereafter, and the President downgrades her revenue targets.

What is public policy success?

I have been thinking about public policy success for three decades, stemming from the time I worked in government in the 1990s. Influenced by a New Public Management emphasis on 'performance', I thought that policies were successful if they achieved their pre-defined goals. My international development work at the World Bank entrenched such belief, given a focus on delivering programmed outputs and outcomes in all my projects. This understanding became less clear over time, however, as I observed situations where goals were met but policy work was seen as a failure—and where goals were not achieved but policies were lauded as successes. The Nomburo case combines observations from a number of these experiences.

Upon leaving the world of practice to join academia, I found that public policy studies shed light on these kinds of situations, showing that conceptions of success vary and that success involves much more than achieving in-program goals (Bovens et al. 2001, McConnell 2010b). A recent

expansion of this work offers that success is “multi-dimensional, multi-perspectivist, and political” (Compton and t’Hart 2019, pp.4-5) and identifies four main types of success to consider—programmatically, process, political, and endurance. I found similar messages emanating from the project management literature—especially applied to international development. Shenhar et al. (2001), for instance, identifies success criteria like ‘efficiency’, ‘customer impact’, ‘business success’, and ‘preparing for the future’, and Diallo and Thuillier (2005) and Khang and Moe (2008) show that such thinking is relevant in international development projects, where they identify multiple success criteria that include non-goal ends to achieve—like establishing new capacity, choosing appropriate processes, and ensuring stakeholder satisfaction.

The message across these literatures that ‘success is multidimensional’ resonates strongly with me but also raises questions: Which dimensions matter? Do different literatures identify the same dimensions? Do practitioners know which dimensions to focus on, and are they doing so? This paper tackles such questions by examining recent articles from the two literatures (on public policy and project management success) to ascertain what they say about success and comparing this with messages emanating from a sample of studies, guides, and instruction manuals on the practice of international development evaluation. My goal is to see if conceptions of success overlap across literatures and if thoughts about success in the policy and project management literatures influence what development evaluation practitioners focus on when assessing success.

I find that there are overlaps and differences in how all three sets of materials reference and assess the concept, with development evaluation materials having the narrowest focus—on efficiently achieving in-program goals (one major dimension of success). I close by discussing how this narrow approach might lead workers like John Mwa to achieve limited success (or even failure) and suggest that the international development community adopt a broader, dynamic narrative approach that better reflects what studies tell us about success and how it is achieved.

Do studies on public policy success impact development thinking?

Many studies exist to help policy practitioners like John Mwa think about their work’s success. A particularly influential public policy stream of work builds on and through studies like Bovens et

al. (2002), Marsh and McConnell (2010), McConnell (2010a, 2010b), Newman (2014), Wu et al. (2015), and Compton and t'Hart (2019). This stream presents success as “multi-dimensional [and] multi-perspectivist,” focusing attention on concepts like ‘programmatic’, ‘process’, ‘political’, ‘endurance’, ‘distributional’, and ‘capacity’ success (Compton and t'Hart 2019, pp.4-5, Virani 2019, Wu et al. 2015). As McConnell (2010a, p.351) notes, one achieves success by attending to all such dimensions with a policy being “successful if it achieves the goals that proponents set out to achieve and attracts no criticism of any significance and/or support is virtually universal.”

A similar project success work stream includes studies like Pinto and Slevin (1998), Shenhar et al. (2001), Müller and Turner (2007), Ika (2009), Shao et al. (2012), Khan et al. (2013), and Joslin and Müller (2015). In keeping with the policy success literature, studies in this stream hold that “success is an ambiguous ... multidimensional concept” (Ika 2009, p.7) with various components to consider—like ‘efficiency’, ‘organizational benefit’, ‘impact’, ‘stakeholder satisfaction’, and ‘future potential’ (Joslin and Müller 2016, Khan, Turner, and Maqsood 2013). In their work on project success in development, Khang and Moe (2008) suggest 19 success criteria to pursue as ends at different points of a project process.

The knowledge arising from these two streams of work is impressive, but I have long wondered how much it influences policy practice—and how practitioners view and pursue success—especially in the international development arena (where my work is most focused).

One way of investigating this concern involves comparing how ‘success’ is presented in the policy and project success literatures and in materials used to inform evaluation work in development (where handbooks like OECD DAC (1991, 2000, 2013), and OECD (2019) are influential).¹ I started such investigation by selecting 15 pieces of applied work from each of the policy success and project success literatures.² These articles took the form of single or multi-case evaluations of

¹ Development organizations like the World Bank conduct a wide variety of evaluations. Project evaluations are most common and the focus here because I am interested in success of individual policy engagements (represented in projects), but it is important to recognize that there are country-level, sector wide, and other evaluations that use different approaches and focus on different kinds of criteria.

² This was done by searching Google Scholar citations for a diverse set of recent articles citing root articles in these two streams of work—Marsh and McConnell (2010) and Shenhar et al. (2001).

policy and project engagements and surveys of work on success.³ An additional 15 development evaluation pieces were then selected, including manuals on bilateral and multilateral agency evaluations of projects and case studies and commentaries based on these entities' evaluations.⁴

I analyzed each study manually, identifying references made to indicators of success.⁵ For instance, Honig (2020) analyzes World Bank projects using the organization's own 'outcomes' indicator, which determines how 'satisfactory' project results are, based on "an assessment of the Relevance of Objectives, Efficacy in achieving each objective, and Efficiency" (World Bank 2017, p.40). Similarly, in their study of public and private sector construction projects in Pakistan, Hussain et al. (2021) mention five focal points of project success, including 'timely completion', 'with prescribed quality standards', 'within given cost', 'achieving project goals successfully', and 'meeting requirements of customers'. In their analysis of stakeholder views on success in public projects in Poland, Magdoń and Brandenburg (2020) list more than ten focal points, including 'project meets the real needs of recipients', 'meeting basic project parameters of time, quality, costs', 'utility', 'acceptance by citizens', 'satisfaction of citizens', 'investment returns', 'availability to the widest possible audience', and 'sustainability'. There were more than ten relevant references in the Hammond et al. (2021) analysis of public private partnership policy success in the English health sector, including 'the very existence of the programme', '[the way] local actors are mobilised in the emergent definition and implementation of 'bright ideas'', 'building a sustainable coalition', 'securing broad buy-in [through participatory processes]', 'widening

³ Studies rooted in the policy success literature were Baines et al. (2020), Begley et al. (2019), Checkland et al. (2021), Chen (2020), Compton et al. (2021), Green et al. (2021), Goyal (2021), Hammond et al. (2021), Hartley et al. (2021), Howie et al. (2020), Makoza (2019), Mohammed (2022), Mohammed and Kuyini (2020), Newman and Head (2015) and Virani (2019). Sources rooted in the project success literature were Ahmad et al. (2021), Al-Hajj and Zraunig (2018), Chow et al. (2021), Gomes et al. (2021), Hussain et al. (2021), Irfan et al. (2021), Khang and Moe (2008), Kolasa et al. (2021), Liang and Jia (2018), Magdoń and Brandenburg (2020), Muhayimana and Kamuhanda (2020), Nisa et al. (2015), Osei-Kyei and Chan (2018), Santos et al. (2020), and Volden (2018).

⁴ The materials were Alvarez et al. (2021), Asian Development Bank (2016), Austrian Development Cooperation (2009), Briggs (2020), Clements (2020), Das and Ngacho (2017), DFID (2005), Honig (2020), JICA (2010), Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2009), Noltze and Harten (2021), SIDA (2015), Surco-Guillen et al. (2022), Wood et al. (2020), and World Bank (2007, 2017). Three of these studies explain how evaluation is done in multilateral development entities, six in bilateral agencies, and six are studies that analyze success in individual projects or across project databases from development entities. They all help to learn about the criteria development entities use in determining success.

⁵ I did not include references that were made in background literature reviews, as these were often not the same references made in actual assessments of success. This is because many studies offered more expansive lists of potential indicators and success criteria in their literature analyses than they deployed in practice.

legitimate political participation’, ‘implementing policy objectives as intended’, ‘the production of learning for future’, ‘the number of other systems that adopt their models’, ‘cost effectiveness’, ‘increased investment’, and ‘political success generated by continuing to take part in the game’.

I recorded 443 references to success across the 45 studies, averaging about 10 per source. I organized these references into categories or dimensions, again manually, and gave each a title derived from the three sub-literatures (like ‘program success’). I then organized the references into different groups within each category and developed a statement to describe the criterion they represented (where I define a criterion as the standard to use in judging policy or project success). For example, 24 references related to ‘political success’, including an observation that ‘the government was able to ensure that the opposition to the program and the process did not escalate or spillover’ in Gujarat’s solar energy policy work (Goyal 2021), and a comment about ‘reduced public and political protests’ in public private partnership project implementation in Ghana (Osei-Kyei and Chan 2018). I judged these references as relating to a similar criterion, which I call ‘political resistance to policy objectives and work is manageable’. Other ‘political success’ references were clearly about different issues, generating three more success criteria: ‘Policy enjoys sufficient political support’, ‘Policy work enhances the reputation and influence of political patrons’, and ‘Political patrons view electoral impacts of the policy as positive.’

I finished the analysis by calculating the share of sources referring to each criterion, by sub-literature, to show if the work streams emphasized dimensions and criteria similarly or differently.

A list of public policy success dimensions and criteria

My analysis yielded 30 public policy success criteria in six dimensions or categories. Table 1 shows the seven criteria related to my first dimension, ‘program success’. These criteria capture various types and levels of success possible in the design and delivery of formal public policy programs and relate to program and programmatic success concerns in the policy and project sub-literatures. The first criterion recognizes how much of an achievement it can be to get a formal policy program approved and funded. Hammond et al. (2021, p.14) refer to this when claiming “the existence of the ... programme and its continued implementation ... as evidence of success.”

Similarly, Khang and Moe (2008, p.78) identify a project success criterion as the “approval of, and commitment to, the project by the key parties” with “sufficient resources committed and ready to be disbursed.” Interestingly, this criterion was only referenced in a few policy and project studies (20% and 13% respectively) and did not feature as a focal point in development evaluation materials (perhaps because these evaluations focus on already-approved-and-funded initiatives).

Table 1. Program success criteria

Criteria	How commonly is this referenced in		
	policy success studies	project success studies	development project evaluation materials
1. Policy program is formally approved and funded	20%	13%	0%
2. Policy program responds to recognized social needs or problems	40%	47%	100%
3. Policy program is technically sound and administratively and political feasible	47%	33%	100%
4. Policy activities and outputs are delivered as programmed	40%	87%	100%
5. Policy work is cost efficient	40%	100%	100%
6. Policy work is time efficient	33%	100%	100%
7. Policy goals are achieved	100%	100%	100%

Source: Author’s original work based on analysis of 45 policy, project and development evaluation success studies.

The second and third program success criteria relate to the quality of a program’s design. Criterion two holds that a program design is successful if it responds to recognized social needs or problems. Volden (2018, Table 2) calls this a program’s ‘relevance’, noting that “[a] project is relevant if there is a need for what the project delivers ... measured in relation to national political priorities, but also stakeholders’ preferences.” Relevance is only referenced in about half of the policy and project analyses, but is a key criterion used in international development evaluations, where project designers (and evaluators) are encouraged to ask, “Are we doing the right things? What is the relevance or significance of the intervention regarding local and national requirements and priorities?” (Austrian Development Cooperation 2009, p.12).

The third criterion is also common in development evaluation—and sometimes mentioned in the other two sets of materials. It can be called design ‘appropriateness’ (DFID 2005, p.56, Abdelmagid et al. 2019, Howie et al. 2020) and deems a program design successful if it is technically sound (proposing solutions and activities that are expected to effectively address focal problems) and administratively and politically feasible (implementable in the specific context). Newman and Head (2015, p.354) refer to such design appropriateness when noting weaknesses in Australia’s initial

carbon policy design and describe how policy plans were altered multiple times to identify more feasible ideas. This implies that the criterion is dynamic and should be seen as a standard to pursue throughout policy work (with designs evolving in response to lessons learned in practice). Evincing such idea, Compton et al. (2019, Table 2) call for “continuously vigilant policy design, decision-making and implementation practices” in policy work. Importantly, relevance and appropriateness are seen as criteria of success (ends to meet) not just factors of success (contributors to ends).

The fourth criterion relates to success in executing policy programs, where ‘policy activities and outputs are implemented or delivered as programmed’. Only 40% of the policy studies reference such criterion in assessing success, but nearly all project evaluations and development evaluation materials cite it as important (and a key indicator of ‘effectiveness’ or ‘efficacy’). In capturing project success, for instance, Osei-Kyei and Chan (2018, p.133) note the importance of projects meeting “expected output ... and delivery” and Moe and Khang (2008, p.78) track two related success criteria, ‘Activities carried out as scheduled’ and ‘Outputs produced’. Similarly, in his applied review of development evaluations methods, Clements (2020) identifies the degree to which output delivery corresponds with initial plans as a key measure of project ‘effectiveness’.

Criteria five and six speak to the ‘efficiency’ of policy or project work, assessed with reference to the cost and time taken to deliver results. These criteria were fundamental in all project analyses and development evaluation materials and were mentioned in 40% and 33% of policy success studies. Irfan et al. (2021, p.1421) note that these are two of the three most common criteria used to assess project success (as part of the oft-cited iron-triangle—or triangle of virtue (Santos et al. 2020)—of ‘Time, Cost and Quality’). The World Bank project completion report evaluation guidelines mention both criteria in describing the way ‘efficiency’ should be assessed, but with more attention to cost concerns. It describes “efficiency” as “a measure of how economically resources and inputs are converted to results” and identifies the “central” efficiency question as whether “costs involved in achieving project objectives were reasonable in comparison with ... benefits and ... recognized norms” (World Bank 2017, pp.37-38).⁶

⁶ The World Bank also looks at time concerns, by examining things like work delays in determining efficiency.

The seventh program success criteria suggests the highest-level program standard: ‘Policy goals are achieved (as defined)’. This is the only criteria referenced in 100% of the materials I reviewed, from all domains. In their analysis of success in a health policy piloting program in England, for instance, Checkland et al. (2021, p.10) ask, ‘Did the pilot program achieve its stated goals?’ Similarly, Compton et al. (2019, Table 1) emphasize ‘Achievement of ... the policy’s intended ... outcomes’, Makoza (2019) notes the importance of achieving short-term and long-term term goals identified in policy plans, Hussain et al. (2021, p.21) focus their ‘quality’ success criteria on whether projects meet “requirements as per the agreement”, and DFID (2005, p.51) defines ‘effectiveness’ as “the extent to which a development intervention has achieved its objectives.”

These seven program success criteria capture achievements within the boundaries of formal programs—which take place in specific time periods, involve specific organizations, and emphasize specific time-bound goals, objectives, or targets (typically defined in annual and multi-year budgets and projects). Concerns about success extend beyond these boundaries, however, and are captured in the second dimension, impact and endurance success (see Table 2).

Table 2. Impact and endurance success criteria

Criteria	How commonly is this referenced in		
	policy success studies	project success studies	development project evaluation materials
8. Policy work has a positive net impact on society	80%	47%	47%
9. Policy does not yield unacceptable gains and losses	53%	13%	0%
10. Policy work and impact is expected to endure and expand	67%	50%	47%
11. Policy work catalyzes new ideas, activities, and opportunities	53%	33%	0%

Source: Author’s original work based on analysis of 45 policy, project and development evaluation success studies.

Criterion 8 offers that success involves having ‘a positive net impact on society’, probing the greater effect of policy work on “broader, more far-reaching objectives” than just what is done in a formal program (Netherlands MFA 2009, p.3). This considers “the totality of ... effects, positive and negative, intended and unintended” (DFID 2005, p.53), assessing various types of impact (like environmental, social, or community). Criterion 9 similarly focuses attention on the distributional effects of policy work, with the following standard for success: ‘Policy does not yield unacceptable gains and losses’. Such a standard is evident in Compton et al. (2019, Table 1), which refers to ‘costs and benefits associated with the policy [being] distributed equitably in society’. Howie et al.

(2020) similarly examine the ‘regressive impacts’ and potential re-distributional effects of policy work, and Virani (2019, p.205) discusses the importance of knowing if policies “yield unequal outcomes for different groups of stakeholders.” This is not an easy success criterion to assess, but suggests that policies cause gains and losses in society and these can be distributed in ways that advantage and disadvantage some groups in unacceptable ways, which can undermine success. Table 2 shows that most policy studies emphasize these criteria, but they are not common focal points in development evaluation materials. This is arguably because development agencies do not explicitly refer to impact when determining project success scores (with World Bank project outcome scores only examining delivery of in-project outputs and outcomes, for instance). Where such entities do evaluate impact or distributional effects (reflecting on things like environmental safeguards), it is seldom to inform key results metrics.

Criteria 10 and 11 relates to policy endurance (drawing on the similarly-named dimension in Compton and t’Hart 2019), capturing whether policy work is sustained and catalytic, with success realized when ‘policy work and impact is expected to endure and expand’ and ‘policy work catalyzes new ideas, activities, and opportunities’. Both criteria were mentioned in studies from the policy and project literature, with Begley et al. (2019, p.8)—for example—referring to work by The Institute for Government who “use a definition of success that reflects policies achieving or exceeding their initial goals” and then “becoming embedded and surviving a change of government [and] representing a starting point for subsequent development.” In contrast, development evaluation materials referred to the first criterion only (emphasizing maintenance of policy work and gains).⁷ For instance, the World Bank (2017, p.61) ‘risk to development outcome’ measure examines “the risk, at the time of evaluation, that development outcomes (or expected outcomes) will not be maintained (or realized).” Similarly, the Asian Development Bank’s “sustainability assessment focuses on the likelihood that project outcomes and outputs will be maintained over the economic life of the project ... or over a meaningful timeframe, demonstrating the persistence of results from the policy supported and institutional actions taken (for policy-

⁷ Project management studies routinely mention a concept of project success that relates to the ‘catalytic’ legacy I propose here, often termed things like ‘preparation for the future’. I seldom found that studies actually included this concept when they actually assessed success, however, settling for the more traditional iron triangle criteria and sometimes adding stakeholder satisfaction measures. See, for instance, Ahmad et al. (2021).

based operations)” (ADB 2016, p.19). Khang and Moe (2008, p.78) evince related concerns in their proposed project success criteria: “Project has good chance of being extended as result of success” and “Project’s outcomes are likely to be sustained.”

Some studies noted that capacity was key to fostering endurance. As a result, and drawing on Wu (2015), I include a capability success category in Table. The first such criterion (12) proposes a success standard related to the way policy work interacts with existing capabilities, suggesting that success is achieved when ‘policy work makes appropriate use of existing contextual capabilities.’ Such standard draws on success dimensions Hartley et al. (2021) propose, which equate policy success with situations where solutions are matched to existing capabilities; and on the observation that Ghana’s free schools policy was not supported by extant systems and other capabilities (Mohammed and Kuyini 2021); and on Newman and Head’s commentary about the importance of knowing and managing the existing “machinery of governance” in policy work (Newman and Head 2015, p.354). According to this standard, a policy is not successful if it requires work that does not suite or make appropriate use of existing capabilities.

Criteria 13 and 14 refer to how policy work expands key aspects of a system’s capability, asking if it improves ‘mechanisms and competences’ and ‘confidence and motivation’ (two key dimensions of capability, reflected in what a system can and is motivated to do). Such criteria recognize that policies influence what kind of work people in system can do (given their competences), and how these people are authorized to do work and feel about doing work (which we know is key to determining how people express their competency). The standards suggest that policies are successful when they leave a legacy of improved capability, with better authorizing mechanisms, stronger abilities, and more confident and motivated people (what a few project management studies call ‘future potential’ (Khan et al. 2013) or ‘preparing for the future’ (Liang and Jia 2020)). These criteria were inspired in part by the Hartley et al. (2021) observation that Vietnam’s Covid-19 policy response succeeded in large part because past policy initiatives (including responses to the SARS virus) strengthened procedures and abilities and improved the motivation and incentives of health sector personnel. In contrast, Green et al. (2021) suggest that Australia’s Safe System policy initiative did not improve capacity, given that “silo thinking still permeat[ed] the road safety community” after the policy and may “have become worse” to undermine the system’s capability.

As Table 3 shows, capability success criteria were not commonly referenced in the materials reviewed—featuring in 33% of policy success and project success analyses for criteria 12 and 13 (and a lower 20% for criterion 14). Development project evaluation materials I reviewed did not refer to any capability success criteria. Studies in all three streams of work were more likely to reference capacity and competence issues as factors affecting project success—acknowledging they matter but as contributors to success not indicators of such.

Table 3. Capability success criteria

Criteria	How commonly is this referenced in		
	policy success studies	project success studies	development project evaluation materials
12. Policy work suites and makes appropriate use of existing capability	33%	33%	0%
13. Policy work improves authorizing mechanisms and competences	33%	33%	0%
14. Policy work improves confidence and motivation	20%	13%	0%

Source: Author’s original work based on analysis of 45 policy, project and development evaluation success studies.

The project success and development evaluation materials also tend to reference politics as a factor affecting success instead of a metric (or criteria) of success. Consider, for instance, the critical success factor Ika et al. (2012, p.111) include in their analysis of international development projects: “Projects did not require political activity in the country.” This conceptualization of ‘politics’ as a contributor to success helps explain why the project and development evaluations materials I reviewed reference few political success criteria (as one can see in Table 4). Table 4 shows that policy success studies do, however, refer to different standards of political success, necessitating a full political success dimension. The first—and most referenced—criterion proposes a simple standard of success as ‘policy objectives and work enjoy sufficient political support’. A relevant reference comes from the study by Begley et al. (2019, pp.21-22), who note that a minimum wage policy was successful when it was “accepted by all of the main parties” such that it would not “be reversed in the foreseeable future.” Hammond et al. (2021) and Goyal (2021) comment similarly on the importance of political support, mobilized through coalitions and capable of bringing policy ideas onto agendas and carrying them through implementation.

The second political success criterion suggests that success occurs when ‘political resistance to policy objectives and work is manageable. This success standard was referenced in one third of

the policy success studies, including Goyal (2021), whose article on solar energy policies in Gujarat is sub-titled, ‘Political success despite programmatic failure’. In discussing the political success of this initiative, Goyal (2021, p.1039) opines that the early phases of work were deemed successful because “opposition to the program and the process did not escalate or spillover.” Similarly, in their study on public private partnership projects in Ghana, Osei-Kyei and Chan (2018) comment that successes were indicated by ‘reduced public and political protests’.

Table 4. Political success criteria

Criteria	How commonly is this referenced in		
	policy success studies	project success studies	development project evaluation materials
15. Policy objectives and work enjoy sufficient political support	67%	0%	0%
16. Policy objectives and work attract manageable political resistance	33%	13%	0%
17. Policy work enhances the reputation and influence of political patrons	33%	0%	0%
18. Political patrons view electoral impacts of policy objectives/work as positive	40%	0%	0%

Source: Author’s original work based on analysis of 45 policy, project and development evaluation success studies.

The third and fourth political success criteria focus on how policies affect the reputational and electoral gains of political patrons, asking if ‘policy work enhances the reputation and influence of political patrons’ and ‘political patrons view electoral impacts of policy objectives/work as positive’. Compton et al. (2019, Table 2) alludes to both standards of success in one criterion, ‘Association with the policy enhances the reputation and political legitimacy of both its architects and its supporters.’ Such criterion is assessed in multiple studies, often with reference to the reputation and electoral success of political leaders. Baines et al. (2020, p.751), for instance, note that David Cameron had to “resign his premiership” because of the Brexit referendum policy, and Mohammed and Kuyini (2020, p.166) comment more positively that the Ghana Free High School Policy “not only enabled the president to clinch victory in the 2016 elections, but also increased the legitimacy of his government.” Other articles suggest that ‘political patrons’ can also be officials in government (especially in contexts where these officials play de facto political roles). Chen (2020, p.93), for instance, notes that a key measure of success was the “reputation of government officials” in China. Beyond this, Checkland et al. (2021) and Hammond et al. (2021, p.14) offer that policies are successful if they promote the reputations of patron entities and enhance their positions relative to other organizations (in accessing finances, for instance).

Table 5’s list of broader stakeholder support success criteria goes beyond politics, capturing what Liang and Jia (2018, p.2) call ‘soft’ project success criteria.⁸ These focus on “the satisfaction of stakeholders,” where “stakeholders refer to ... the parties that could affect or be affected by project implementation” and where “a project could be recognized as a successful one only if the individual or mutual expectations of the stakeholders are met.” I identify five key parties in these criteria—implementing agents, policy users, targeted beneficiaries, financing entities, the public administration, and the general citizenry—and propose a common standard that focuses on how much the stakeholder group in question supports policy objectives and work. I also identify a criterion (25) that emphasizes the importance of policy work building trust in and support for government policy initiatives in general (such that success of a policy is measured at least partly in terms of the trust and support it engenders for other policies).

Table 5. Stakeholder success criteria

Criteria	How commonly is this referenced in		
	Policy success studies	Project success studies	Development Project Evaluations
19. Implementing agents support policy objectives and work	33%	33%	27%
20. Policy users are satisfied with, support policy objectives/work, and use the policy	20%	47%	0%
21. Targeted beneficiaries are satisfied with and support policy objectives and work	40%	80%	0%
22. Financing entities provide enough support to policy objectives and work	27%	13%	60%
23. The public administration provides enough support to policy objectives and work	33%	27%	33%
24. Citizens in general provide enough support to policy objectives and work	27%	27%	0%
25. The policy work builds trust in and support for government policy initiatives	20%	20%	0%

Source: Author’s original work based on analysis of 45 policy, project and development evaluation success studies.

As the table shows, references to the stakeholder support criteria came from across all three sets of studies. For example, Ahmad et al. (2021, p.9) cite that a public private partnership project’s success is demonstrated by the satisfaction of various stakeholders, including the special purpose vehicle involved in project implementation, the public who use the project deliverables, the debt companies financing project work, and government entities ultimately responsible for outcomes. Similarly, Khang and Moe (2008, p.80) include success criteria related to the perceptions of the implementing agency, funding agency, team members, target beneficiaries, and general public, Chen (2020, p.134) notes the importance of assessing the “support and collaboration of other

⁸ As opposed to “acknowledged early project success indicators [in] the “iron triangle” [which] are associated with “hard” project objective measures [like] schedule, cost, and quality standards” (Liang and Jia 2018, p.2).

departments and upper-level government,” Nisa et al. (2015) examine their project’s reputation among principal donors to assess ‘project profile’ success, and Liang and Jia (2018) suggest that a project’s success depends in part on whether it improves a government’s reputation. Beyond such examples, materials as varied as Al Hajj and Zraunig (2018), Asian Development Bank (2016, pp.25-27), Checkland et al. (2021), Chow et al. (2021), Gomes et al (2021), Green et al. (2021), Irfan et al. (2021), Kolasa et al. (2020), Magdoń and Brandenburg (2020), and Makoza (2019) examine the support or satisfaction of implementation teams and end-users, beneficiaries, the general public, financing entities, and public administration bodies when assessing success.

Table 6 shows a final category of success criteria. These are the process appropriateness criteria March and McConnell (2010, p.571) refer to in discussing the importance of “legitimacy” in policy work, where one considers whether policies arise “through due processes of constitutional and quasi-constitutional procedures and values of democracy, deliberation and accountability.”

Table 6. Process success criteria

Criteria	How commonly is this referenced in		
	Policy success studies	Project success studies	Development Project Evaluations
26. Nothing about the policy program or work is perceived as illegal or corrupt	33%	27%	0%
27. The policy process is considered sufficiently inclusive, participatory, and transparent	47%	13%	0%
28. Stakeholders view the policy process and distribution as sufficiently fair	47%	0%	0%
29. Policy processes are sufficiently respected (as appropriate to the work)	40%	20%	0%
30. Policy processes are sufficiently flexible (to allow adaptations)	27%	20%	0%

Source: Author’s original work based on analysis of 45 policy, project and development evaluation success studies.

The first two criteria in Table 6 manifest in simple standards, ‘Nothing about the policy program or work is perceived as illegal or corrupt’ and ‘The policy process is considered sufficiently inclusive, participatory, and transparent’. These standards were informed by comments in both policy and project success studies but not in materials related to development evaluations. Examples of sources citing such criteria include Irfan et al. (2021) who note that project success depends in part on compliance with safety and environmental regulations (a legal concern). Similarly, Das and Ngacho (2017) and Osei-Kyei and Chan (2018) hold that a project’s success depends partly on the number of site disputes and litigations it attracts (again a legal issue), Virani (2019) assesses success by referring to a policy’s transparency and contract enforcement, corporate accountability, participatory decision-making, and regulatory compliance (a blend of

legal, participatory and transparency concerns), and Howie et al. (2020) emphasize accountability and transparency in assessing policy success. Hammond et al. (2021, p.13) also refer to the importance of examining participation when considering policy success, noting that policies gain legitimacy when many views are considered.

Criterion 28 is included because various studies indicated that policy success is also affected by perceptions of fairness—of the policy process and distributions arising from such. In their study of Australia’s carbon pricing policy, Newman and Head (2015, p.353) argue that views on policy fairness affected perceptions of the policy’s success and failure (“failure will be perceived by some while others will perceive success”) that ultimately undermined policy progress. They also imply that policy processes can exacerbate or mitigate these perceptions, with “the challenge [being] to identify these stakeholders [who perceive policy is a failure] and to explain how the policy has or has not failed them.” Chen (2020, p.86) echoes such thought in a study on policy work in Chinese villages, noting that citizens might be more concerned with procedural equity (who was involved in designing and implementing policies) than distributive equity (who gained or lost) and oppose policies because of perceived unfairness in how policies are developed. Mohammed and Kuyini (2021, p.164) provide an example of this from their study on free schooling policies in Ghana, where they argue that most citizens did not know actual policy results or the distribution of such but perceived these were unequal based on procedural evidence (like differential processes to hire teachers and procure textbooks), which undermined success.

Continuing the focus on processes, criterion 29 suggests that policy success occurs when ‘policy processes are sufficiently respected (as appropriate to the work)’. References informing this criterion related to the fit of processes to problems and contexts, recognizing that some approaches to policy work impose too much stress or pressure on a system or are just a poor match to the problem of context and lead to declining policy legitimacy. In discussing the success of Vietnam’s Covid-19 policies, for example, Hartley et al. (2021, p.164) posit that the “personally restrictive and economically burdensome measures” imposed by government in early parts of the pandemic would not be perceived as appropriate for very long (such that processes would need to loosen to retain legitimacy). Similarly, Goyal (2021, p.1038) takes issue with the land acquisition processes used to locate the Gujarati solar park that “led to increasing resentment” because they

was a poor fit to the context (with the government appropriating land that had been “used for cattle grazing, collection of fuelwood, and farming ... without the due process and the necessary social impact assessment” in a way that “compromised the legitimacy of the process”). In contrast, Hammond et al. (2021) argue that public private partnership policy success in the English health sector was partly the result of highly respected processes being deployed, which were then replicated in other domains—such that success was measured in part by the number of other systems that adopted their models (given that their processes were seen as best practice).

The final criterion suggests that policies are successful when ‘processes are sufficiently flexible (to allow adaptations)’. This was a surprise addition, as it seems to be a cause of success rather than a criterion to assess success. However, several policy success studies viewed it as an indicator of success, related to the importance of policies being responsive to change and pressure. Hammond et al. (2021, p.12) for instance, note that the Test Beds policy they examined was deemed a success because it mobilised local actors “in the emergent definition and implementation of ‘bright ideas’” which was central to the success narrative of the policy (that it was innovative and catalytic). Without the flexible process, it would not have enjoyed such narrative. Similarly, Howie et al. (2020, pp.7-9) include ‘policy flexibility’ as a success dimension to assess emissions trading schemes in Vietnam and Myanmar. They detail what this means and why it matters: “Ability to cope with time inconsistency; provide carbon price predictability and credibility over time; promote economic bases of capital stock renewal; and enable good debt level management by allowing firms to smooth out fluctuations due to business cycles.”

Conclusion

I include the process success criteria in Table 7, which lists all 30 policy success criteria identified in this study. The list also shows how often each criterion was referenced in the three sets of studies, with lightly shaded blocks denoting that more than 40 percent of a group of studies referenced the criterion and darkly shaded blocks denoting that more than 50 percent of a group of studies referenced the criterion.

Table 7. The full list of policy success criteria

	How commonly is this referenced in		
	Policy success Literature	Project success literature	Evaluation practice materials
Program success			
1. Policy program is formally approved and funded	20%	13%	0%
2. Policy program responds to recognized social needs or problems	40%	47%	100%
3. Policy program is technically sound and administratively and political feasible	47%	33%	100%
4. Policy activities and outputs are implemented/delivered as programmed/specified	40%	87%	100%
5. Policy work is considered cost efficient	40%	100%	100%
6. Policy work is considered time efficient	33%	100%	100%
7. Policy goals are achieved (as formally defined)	100%	100%	100%
Impact and endurance success			
8. Policy work has a positive net impact on society	73%	47%	47%
9. Policy does not yield unacceptable gains and losses	53%	13%	0%
10. Policy work/work is expected to endure and expand	67%	50%	47%
11. Policy work catalyzes new ideas, activities, and opportunities	53%	33%	0%
Capability success			
12. Policy work suites and makes appropriate use of existing capability	33%	33%	0%
13. Policy work improves authorizing mechanisms and competences	33%	33%	0%
14. Policy work improves confidence and motivation	20%	13%	0%
Political success			
15. Policy objectives and work enjoy sufficient political support	67%	0%	0%
16. Political resistance to policy objectives and work is manageable	33%	13%	0%
17. Policy work enhances the reputation and influence of political patrons	33%	0%	0%
18. Political patrons view electoral impacts of policy objectives/work as positive	40%	0%	0%
Stakeholder success			
19. Implementing agents support policy objectives and work	33%	33%	27%
20. Policy users are satisfied with and support policy objectives/work (and use the policy)	20%	53%	0%
21. Targeted beneficiaries are satisfied with and support policy objectives and work	40%	80%	0%
22. Financing entities provide enough support to policy objectives and work	27%	13%	60%
23. The public administration provides enough support to policy objectives and work	33%	27%	33%
24. Citizens in general provide enough support to policy objectives and work	27%	27%	0%
25. The policy work builds trust in and support for government policy initiatives in general	27%	20%	0%
Process success			
26. Nothing about the policy program or work is perceived as illegal or corrupt	33%	27%	0%
27. The policy process is considered sufficiently inclusive, participatory, and transparent	53%	13%	0%
28. Stakeholders view the policy process and distribution as sufficiently fair	53%	0%	0%
29. Policy processes are sufficiently respected (as appropriate to the work)	40%	20%	0%
30. Policy processes are sufficiently flexible (to allow adaptations)	27%	20%	0%

Source: Author's original work based on analysis of 45 policy, project and development evaluation success studies. Lightly shaded blocks denote that more than 40 percent of a group of studies referenced the criterion. Darkly shaded blocks denote that more than 50 percent of a group of studies referenced the criterion.

The list suggests that there are many different criteria (and criteria dimensions) to consider when doing policy work, with the three different sub-literatures framing and assessing 'success' quite differently. Studies in the public policy sub-literature reference all 30 success criteria, with focal points (given more than 50% of references) in four categories (program, impact and endurance, political, and process success). Project management studies cited 25 of the 30 criteria, with a focus

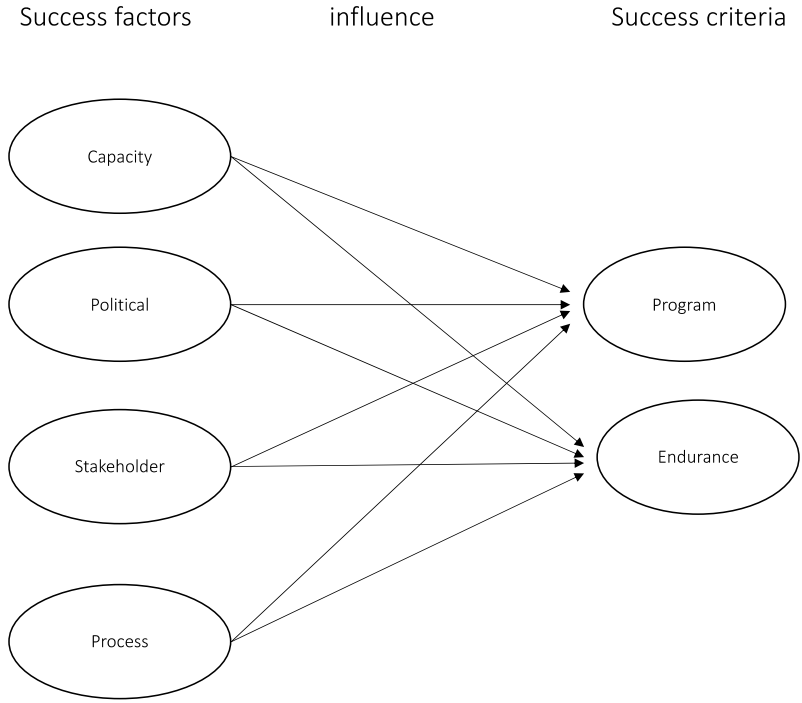
on three categories (program, impact and endurance, and stakeholder success). Development evaluation studies referenced 11 criteria, with most focus in only one category (program success). While the research method could be improved,⁹ these observations resonate with other work. For instance, dominant articles in the policy success literature also emphasize program, process, policy, and endurance categories (Compton and t'Hart 2019). Similarly, the criteria I see most referenced in respect of project success are also commonly identified in surveys of the project management literature (Lamprou and Vagiano 2018, Pereira 2021). Additionally, the criteria standing out in my review of development evaluation work are also showcased in other studies. Ika et al. (2010, p.75), for instance, note that development projects emphasize “project management success” (focused on attaining initially identified objectives on time and within budget), and a good project “profile” (where the project achieves a high national profile, good reputation among donors, and chance of being extended with additional funding). These focal points relate to criteria 4 through 7 and 22, which also stand out in my analysis.

The narrowness of the development evaluation studies approach to success raises some red flags. First, given its focus on achieving promised results within the time, organization, and goal-defined boundaries of formal programs, such focus might bias policy workers against attending to what happens beyond program boundaries (of time, scope, etc.) (as captured in the impact and endurance and capability criteria, which are not commonly referenced in development evaluations materials). Such a bias could explain why actors like John Mwa view and pursue success in terms of short to medium-term goal-based performance only (or predominantly). Ika et al. (2010, pp.78-79) suggest this may be true, finding that coordinators of development projects often view success in this narrow way, tending “not to care about project impact, as surprising as it may seem.” More work is needed to assess this, and determine how other policy actors (designers, political authorizers, implementers, and beneficiaries) view and pursue success.

⁹ I started doing the analysis in an exploratory manner—working by myself to identify and analyze applied studies. I got so deep in the analysis that I continued doing the analysis alone. This is not strange for such research, and in fact most of the studies I examined employed a similar approach to doing case or survey analysis. This kind of analysis is best done with multiple analysts involved, however, to facilitate comparative examination, detail checking, and other activities that enhance the reliability and validity of the analysis.

A second red flag relates to the way this narrow definition de-emphasizes ‘soft’ success concerns that are not written up as goals of programmatic plans (like the criteria included in political, stakeholder, and process success categories). Some readers might suggest that these ‘softer’ concerns are not really success criteria (“dependent variables that measure the successful outcome of a project”) and argue that project designers in fact give them serious attention as success factors (“the independent elements of a project that can increase the likelihood of success”) (Lamprou and Vagiona 2018, p.276; see also Santos et al. 2020, p.41). Figure 1 captures such thinking, where one controls the softer success factors to achieve the more robust but narrower goal-based criteria (and impact and endurance).

Figure 1. Treating ‘soft’ criteria as success factors instead of criteria



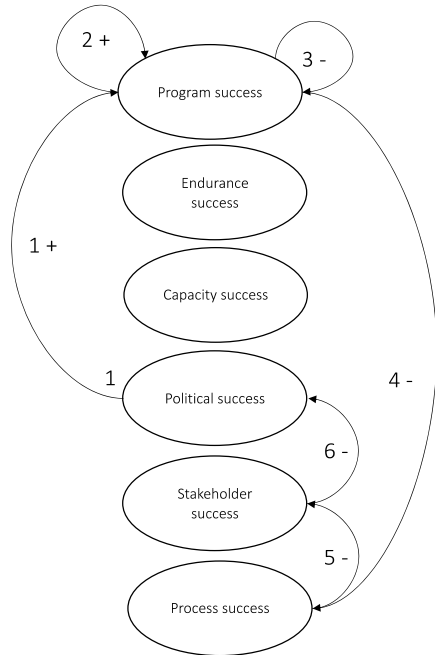
Source: Author’s original work.

I worry about such approach, given the way some studies I reviewed show these softer factors as influential success criteria that defined success at some point in time. I think of Hartley et al. (2021) arguing that the capacity legacy of Vietnam’s SARS response was evidence of success (not a contributor to such), and Goyal (2021) showing that the Gujarati solar energy policy succeeded politically even though the political gains did not influence programmatic success. I am also

reminded of cases where policies reached goals but were curtailed because stakeholders stopped supporting the work, often because they perceived processes as inappropriate or imposing unequal burdens on society (an example being the Australian carbon pricing policy engagement recounted by Newman and Head (2015)). The ‘softer’ capability, political, stakeholder, and process concerns turned out to be definitional success criteria in these examples.

When reflecting on such examples, I wonder if Figure 1’s approach to thinking about policy success is problematic, and we should not see success concerns as either (or only) factors or criteria or assume we can define one measure of success to focus on or assume deterministic and static causal relationships between so-called factors and criteria. Figure 2 offers a different approach to viewing and pursuing success, where we might see success criteria as interacting in dynamic narratives where different concerns dominate what it means to succeed at different points of time or for different groups and where performance on one concern impacts others—such that criteria are also factors, or criteria-factors, influencing other criteria—in dynamic inter-temporal stories.

Figure 2. Another way to view and pursue success: Criteria-factors interact in success narratives



Source: Author’s original work.

Figure 2 suggests a dynamic narrative of the Nomburo case (my introductory story from the field). The story started at point 1 with a high-level of political support—or positive performance on

success criterion 15 ('policy objectives and work enjoy sufficient political support'). This initial success created conditions or opportunities for program activities by John Mwa and the NRA (see the '+' associated with the arrow from the political success category to the program success category). Mwa and his team then enjoyed in-program success, with the '2 +' arrow indicating that they met standards in criteria 5 to 7 (where policy work achieved formally defined goals in a cost and time efficient manner). This success was not the end of the story, however, as the poor were disproportionately disadvantaged by the policy work (shown in arrow '3-', which denotes that Mwa's efforts failed to meet criteria 8 and 9, 'Policy work has a positive net impact on society' and 'Policy does not yield unacceptable gains and losses'). Concerns over these impacts and equity issues raised questions about process appropriateness, with an inquiry opened into how Mwa's NRA collected revenues and the role the President played in supporting such (arrow '4-', which signals a failure to meet criteria 28 and 29, 'Stakeholders view the policy process and distribution as sufficiently fair' and 'Policy processes are sufficiently respected'). This then had a negative impact on stakeholder support (with arrow '5-' indicating failures to achieve the standards set out in criteria 19 through 21, related to support from implementing agents, policy users, and targeted beneficiaries) and ultimately led to reduced political sponsorship (in arrow '6-', where the President was forced to fire Mwa and rethink her patronage of the policy work).

This version of the Nomburo case channels what Nicklin (2019, p.173) calls the Dynamic Narrative approach to thinking about policy "successes"—as "multiple and relational," playing "out in a shifting story-scape that progresses throughout the life of a policy." It also resonates with the Life-Cycle Based Framework Khang and Moe (2008) introduce to explain project success, where criteria differ at every stage and ends can also be means (with a success criterion in one stage becoming a success factor in another). The authors posit, "dynamic linkages between criteria and factors in successive phases provide a more solid conceptual foundation to evaluate the project's current and future status, because different activities, players, deliverables and environments at the various project phases necessitate different conditions for success" (Khang and Moe 2008, p.83).

This kind of dynamic narrative seems an interesting and strategically inclusive way to view and pursue success (where one is not ignoring a success criterion or category or treating it as a success factor only). It is the kind of approach that one might see in the policy or project management

success sub-literatures, given that both are quite inclusive about success. It is less likely to be an approach one would see in the development evaluation sub-literature, however, given how focused these materials are on program success criteria (and seem to view other success concerns as simple means to achieve success, not ends). I worry that this narrower approach means that actors like John Mwa are not taught, encouraged or empowered to see success broadly and to navigate between criteria in a dynamic manner—building the policy success narrative—but work as passive observers of most success concerns, hoping that stars align to meet program goals.

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