

# STRENGTHENING POLICY INSTITUTES IN MYANMAR



**The Asia Foundation**  
Improving Lives, Expanding Opportunities

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*This note considers how policy institutes can systematically and effectively support policy processes in Myanmar. Opportunities for improved policymaking have grown following reforms and the gradual introduction of democracy. The November 2015 elections in which the National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a landslide created further potential to support new policy directions, while raising new questions over how the Government will respond to growing demands from people across the country. Although current capacity is limited, policy institutes can gradually help political leaders respond to these challenges, by providing better data and analysis and improving how policies are formulated.*

Policy institutes are independent or partly independent organizations engaging in research and other activities that supports policy processes. Also known as think tanks or research institutes, they can be situated alone or within bodies such as universities, trade unions, or chambers of commerce. Some are affiliated with government departments or political parties. Many of the points made here can also be applied to research units that operate within government departments or even as separate government policy institutes.

Policy involves government actions and decisions on issues of public concern. Policy comes in many forms – laws, budgets, presidential decrees, ministry directives, funding-allocation decisions, and so on. It involves civil servants as well as political leaders, and region/state governments as well as the Union level. Policymaking is above all a political process, and there is rarely universal agreement on what ideal policy looks like, but some common principles can be identified.

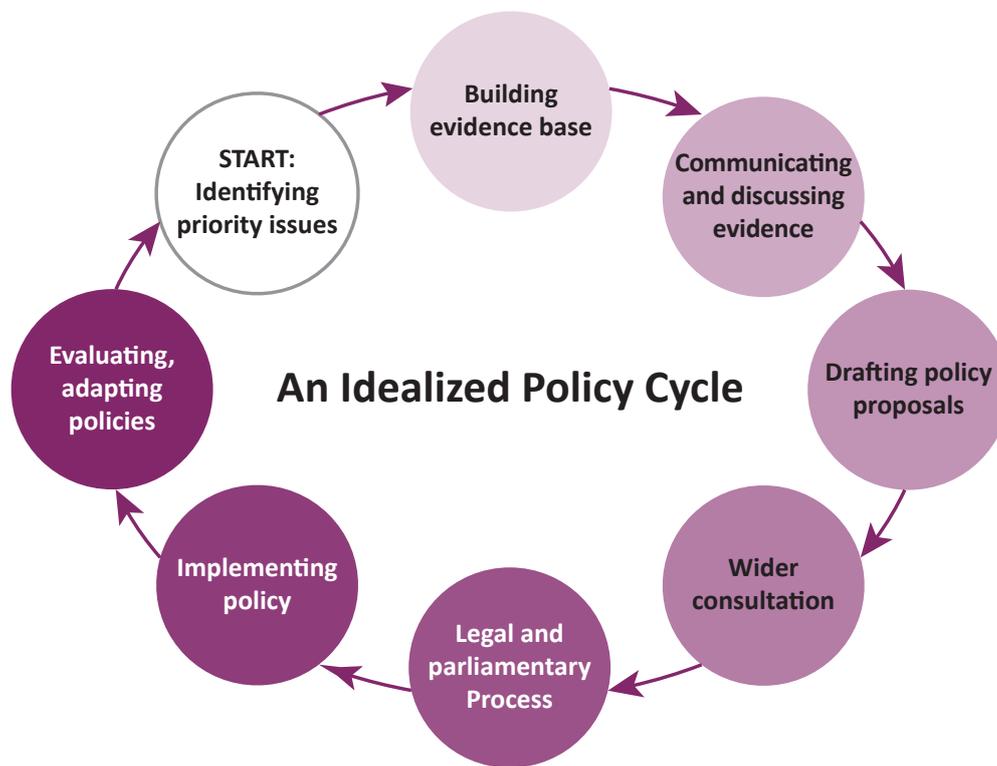
Evidence-based policymaking should be based on rational assessments. Especially in a democracy, policymaking also needs to consider political processes: the impact of policies on people, public opinion, interest groups, and even international relations. Political issues like constitutional reform or peace processes involve many policy issues that need close consideration.

## Three characteristics of good policies

1. **Implementable:** Good policies are not just words, but lead to action and can be implemented.
2. **Effective:** Good policies must be able to achieve their goals and support the wider aims of government.
3. **Evidence based:** Good policies are almost always founded on good research that involves applying accurate information to identify problems and derive solutions to those problems.

## How can research help improve policymaking?

Policymaking is normally a complex and often subtle process that involves much more than just making decisions. Each policy process is unique, depending on the specific context and the task being addressed. An idealized policy cycle can be seen below.



In practice, policymaking only sometimes follows a regular, official process. Changes in the political environment, efforts to influence proposed policies, and other considerations can lead to unpredictable sequences of events. For instance, policy proposals may change following responses that politicians receive from the public or from influential groups. At times, parliament may block or force changes to policy proposed by the president or ministers.

Whatever the process, good policymaking needs to be based wherever possible on accurate, neutral data. Without this, it is almost impossible to predict what the impact of a policy will be or to choose the best option to follow. The trend is clear: those countries with more development success tend to be better at using evidence when designing and implementing policies.

Effective policies based on reliable information are a vital step towards national development that fulfills people’s needs and rights. Policies that go beyond meeting immediate political challenges and provide sustainable solutions must be both practical and relevant. One essential component is an evidence base that accurately describes the current context and explains the potential impact of policy options, to help policymakers make the most-informed decisions. Policy research – research that targets primarily the interests of policymakers rather than academics – aims to fulfill this requirement.

In Myanmar, civilian policymakers have limited experience of basing decisions on evidence rather than on personal and political interests. Difficult choices over policy direction and resource allocation need to be supported by relevant information wherever possible. By making a stronger case for proposed action, information can help policymakers to challenge powerful interest groups and individuals seeking to block reforms or change policy for their own benefit. Research can help policymakers to explain why difficult decisions and hard choices over resource allocations were made. Policy research can also improve transparency by providing information to the public and, in some cases, by involving people in the research process itself.

Conducting policy research involves finding and presenting information that is accurate and impartial. Researchers also need to demonstrate the policy implications of research data to senior politicians and civil servants.

## Support across the policy cycle

Policy institutes can offer support at different stages of the policy cycle. Research findings can be used to produce policy briefings. Existing research can be summarized or translated, while comparisons with other countries offer useful examples for policymakers to build on and adapt. Information can be communicated in

many formats. Briefings or presentations target specialized audiences, and press releases or online materials aim to reach the general public.

In addition to research, many other aspects of policy processes are often carried out by policy institutes and other, similar institutions. These often involve summarizing data, carrying out cost-benefit analysis, assessing impact on the public or particular groups in society, explaining the practical implications, and generating policy recommendations. Briefings, policy proposals, comparisons of options, and similar summary notes can all support the efforts of policymakers. Policy institutes can also support consultation processes that access data and canvass different views. Consultation can take place on many different levels.

## Types of policy consultation

Consultation can improve policymaking and generate public support for proposals. Care is needed to ensure that events generate useful feedback and are not taken over by interest groups. The best approach depends on the situation – there is no universal model. Examples:

- Review forums for invited specialists or selected leaders
- Open debate among experts, possibly with media coverage
- Consideration in parliamentary committees and other official processes
- Opinion surveys, focus groups, public complaints mechanisms, press releases
- Facilitated public meetings organized around specific issues and engaging civil society organizations

Public engagement is a vital and often neglected part of policy development. Two-way information flows help to check data and to test proposals, making for improved policies. Public awareness and involvement can build popular support for proposed changes. These steps can give policy proposals more political strength, allowing policymakers to counter vested interests that seek to undermine proposed changes.

Some efforts to build popular participation in policy processes were made by the Thein Sein administration. The National League for Democracy has indicated that the new government will prioritize public engagement, generating space to support participation in policymaking.

Consultation can, however, generate problems. Rather than strengthening policy directions and increasing the authority of policymakers, it can in some cases lead to delays and eventual policymaking paralysis. At times, public consultation is taken over by powerful lobbies or political interests. Careful management is needed to encourage participation while avoiding these risks. It should be noted that consultation can also be costly, and therefore different types of consultation for different policies should be considered.

Finally, policy institutes can monitor and evaluate policy impact over time. Ongoing, repeated data collection is vital for economic management as well as for targeting public investments in health or social welfare.

## Range of inputs to policymaking

Building evidence base	Communicating and discussing evidence	Direct support for policy design	Evaluation and ongoing inputs to improve implementation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assessing available information</li> <li>- Conducting new research on relevant issues</li> <li>- Participatory research on public perceptions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Working with media to communicate research findings</li> <li>- Public forums, surveys, meetings to seek popular views and share findings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitating policy dialogues, expert forums, or advisory groups</li> <li>- Involving key stakeholders throughout the policy process</li> <li>- Writing policy proposals and briefings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ongoing monitoring through regular fieldwork, possibly to inform an advisory group</li> <li>- Evaluating the impact of policies</li> <li>- Training for civil servants, senior policymakers, others</li> </ul>

Good relationships between policymakers and researchers are important. If sufficient understanding exists between these two groups, then it is more likely that research products and other inputs will be relevant and will be used to improve government policies. Relationships can assume many different forms, from informal, personal links to formal, long-term contracts. In Myanmar, high-level advisors or other well-connected individuals often form a bridge between senior policymakers and key researchers in national or international institutes.

Governments need to be able to absorb and use policy research. Otherwise, new information may end up having no impact, regardless of its quality or relevance. Formal measures to support research uptake include dedicated government policy units and advisory posts, parliamentary committees, and inter-ministry working groups to monitor proposals. Supporting steps include policy discussion documents (“green papers”), policy guides (“white papers”), and consultations with representative groups like trade unions, producer associations, or civil society organizations.

Most policy issues have a potential impact across many fields and involving different interests. The need for good information applies to high-profile political issues such as constitutional reform or federalism, and to more specific, lower-profile issues such as changes to public service delivery or the design of infrastructure projects.

## Conducting policy research

Once a research issue has been identified, researchers must find out what evidence already exists from available sources. Sometimes there is no need to conduct new fieldwork, so researchers can focus on analyzing current data and drawing out relevant findings. On occasion, translating existing material from other languages may be the most useful step. But in many cases, further information must be gathered through fieldwork. The appropriate research methods depend on the specific issue being addressed and may include surveys, interviews, comparisons with other countries, or other approaches.

For senior policymakers, research findings have to be presented in an accessible format. Long reports using technical language may be useless unless supported by more accessible information such as short summary notes, presentations, or verbal briefings.

Detailed, extensive research remains important even if the most important readers never look at it. Solid information can justify the research findings and policy recommendations as well as enabling future work on specific issues. When equipped with a strong knowledge base, policy institutes are well placed to provide ongoing policy support over several years rather than being limited to one-off inputs.

## Policy institutes – international experience

Across the world, policy institutes are strategically located to enable access to senior civil servants and policymakers in major cities and capitals – for instance in Delhi, Seoul, London, or Washington, DC. Some are independent, and others are affiliated with a political party or interest group. Many institutes receive government funding and feed evidence directly into high-level policymaking. They often have progressive aims such as promoting development, human rights, equality, and justice. They may prioritize informing the

Research processes should be shaped around specific needs. Typical steps include:

1. Building links between researchers and policymakers
2. Recognizing the problem and agreeing on the aim
3. Reviewing existing data
4. Defining research questions
5. Choosing the methodology and designing the research
6. Finding a team of researchers
7. Carrying out the research
8. Assessing data and drawing policy recommendations
9. Preparing research outputs including summaries, presentations, and briefings

public about government and giving a voice to the needs of marginalized or silent groups.

In most cases, policy institutes in Asian countries maintain links to the government system or a dominant political party. Yet they also have some freedom to define their priorities and generate independent research. Within this general trend, they do not follow a single approach or model, their form depending largely on the political system that they work within.

- Some policy institutes specialize in one sector and work closely with the corresponding government department, such as the Japan Institute for International Affairs, or Vietnam's Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development. At least in their initial stages, they may be fully government-funded.
- Many policy institutes retain strong links with government yet have a broader remit and work with different ministries or provide inputs to help set national priorities. They are often established as private, non-profit organizations and receive some funding from businesses, foreign donors, or other sources. Examples are the Korea Development Institute and the Thailand Development Research Institute.
- Policy institutes are often established within prestigious universities such as Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies or institutes inside several large universities in China. Others are founded by large companies to explore specific economic or scientific fields, most notably in Japan and South Korea.
- Some of the most independent research institutes have emerged from a history of political protest and civil society activism. They tend to focus on human rights, public welfare, and monitoring government actions. Groups include the Korean People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy and several human rights institutes in the Philippines.

## Trends in Myanmar

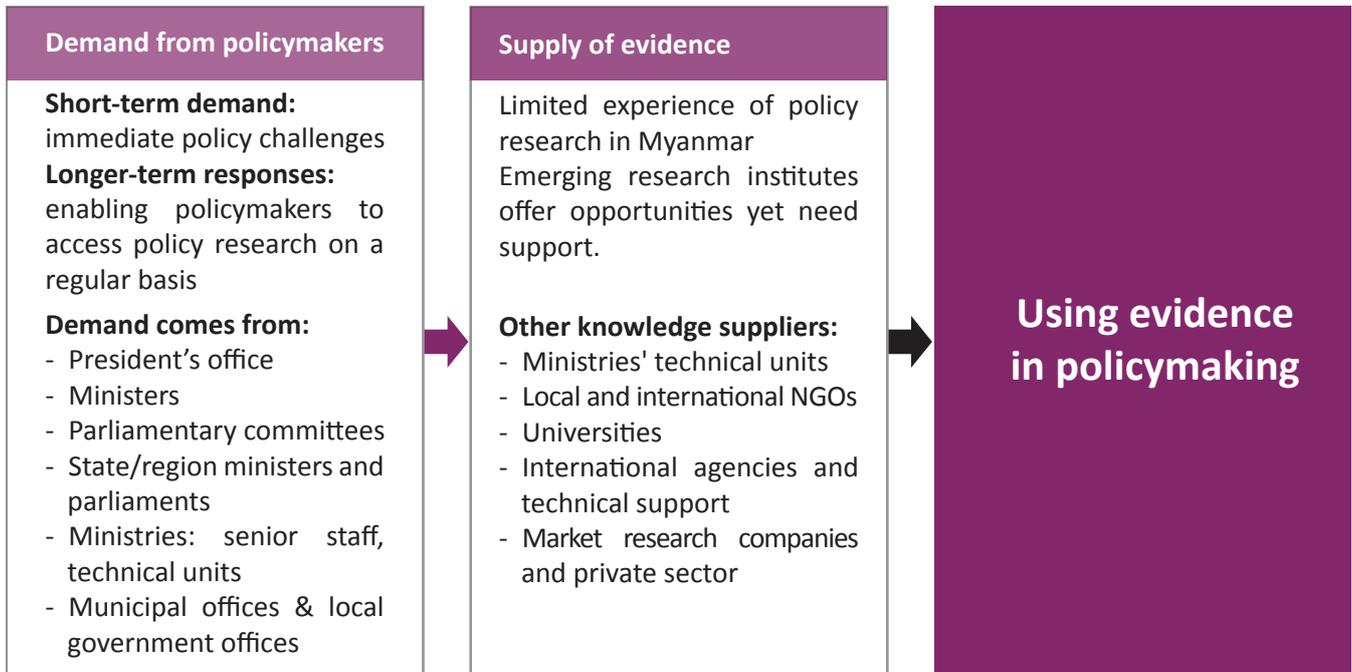
The scope for evidence-based policymaking in Myanmar has been shaped by the legacy of military rule. Today's civilian government institutions have only limited experience of using information as a basis for planning. From the early 1960s, important decisions were typically made by acting military leaders, and security priorities dominated policymaking. Some development progress was achieved, but Myanmar fell behind other Southeast Asian countries. Accurate statistics or data on social and economic issues were rare, and the capacity of civil government institutions to conduct policy analysis deteriorated over time. Policy institutes and other independent bodies were limited or nonexistent. Senior civil servants were mainly retired military officials; universities conducted very little research; and international engagement was severely curtailed.

This hierarchical and controlled environment fostered a culture of withholding information. Senior policymakers tended not to share knowledge with others, and transparency was rarely encouraged. At the same time, political relationships were often personal, with policies being formed around the interests of influential individuals or groups. Many policies stemmed from unofficial agreements between powerful individuals rather than any formal process. There were few formal checks or balances to moderate the actions of powerful individuals.

Since the introduction of political reforms and the start of Thein Sein's administration in 2011, Myanmar has moved forward rapidly. More freedom of speech, some greater transparency, and improved freedom of association have generated a better environment for establishing research organizations and policy institutes. Foreign funding and technical support are now widely available, as international aid agencies promote evidence-based approaches to reform and development.

Policymaking, however, has remained concentrated at the top with the president (including the president's office and advisors) and, informally, with senior military leaders. Policymakers tend to have limited experience of commissioning or using evidence. Typically, a senior figure – a minister, deputy minister, or presidential advisor – accesses policy advice from individual experts or institutions. Experience of public consultation is limited. Ministries and departments have little scope to implement policies without direct instruction.

The NLD-led government confronts these same challenges. Many new ministers and members of parliament have limited policy experience and little background in using information. For good, evidence-based policymaking, leaders need to demand information, and policy institutes or other bodies must be able to supply it, as shown in the illustration below.



Policy research and the skills to use information effectively can help the government to implement its agenda. Open use of accurate information can help support new policies by building popular support and making a strong case to overcome vested interests or potential bureaucratic resistance. As well as producing relevant and good-quality information, research institutes can encourage public awareness and engagement, taking advantage of smart phones and the internet as well as more traditional ways of communicating.

## Policy institutes in Myanmar

The scope to generate better information that influences policymaking in Myanmar is increasing from a low base. New research groups and institutes have been formed, addressing a wide range of issues from service delivery to economic growth to constitutional reform to peace building. They have emerged from a basis in civil society and political activism, and some were already becoming active in providing data and analysis to the Thein Sein administration. Others have connections with the NLD, or in some cases with ethnic minority leaders. All these emerging research institutes provide a valuable resource that policymakers in the new government can access.

But efforts to support better policymaking are at a very early stage, and major challenges remain. Knowledge supply is constrained by limited available research skills, and new institutes tend to prioritize training and networking over research. New research bodies have not yet established a solid reputation, and their operations, due to limited institutional strength, rely on specific individuals. Demand for information is constrained by the wide gap and distrust between the government and civil society after years of military authoritarianism, as well as by the lack of forums for policy discussion.

Long-term efforts to build both the demand for and the supply of evidence-based knowledge are needed. As policy institutes continue to grow, they can concentrate on viable steps that are compatible with current needs and ongoing capacity building. Building good relationships with both government departments and politicians will enable them to build trust and engage meaningfully in policymaking processes. Managing existing information through libraries or databases, and presenting data effectively for senior leaders, are realistic tasks. Policy institutes can also work on different aspects of the policymaking process, from consultation to monitoring impact, as well as on research itself.

## Key issues for policy institutes

In order to play a valuable, long-term role, policy institutes need a sustainable foundation. This requires committed leadership, research capacity, and sufficient funding. Some key traits for policy institutes to consider are listed below.

A clear focus and strategy. Policy institutes need a clear direction, whether it is defined by sector (such as health or rural economics), issue (for example popular empowerment or constitutional change), or engagement with government processes (such as feeding into planning cycles). It may help to define the target audiences that the policy institute is aiming to work with.

Maintaining independence. Sufficient independence is needed even if the policy institute is associated with the government or political parties. Some clear guidelines may be important, for example to define acceptable sources of funding and whether institute staff are allowed to hold positions with other organizations.

Financial and administrative systems. These are vital to enable effective operations, for accountability, and for fundraising. Policy institutes need to build their profile and sustainability over time, moving beyond individual leaders towards becoming effective organizations.

Accountability and oversight. Measures to consider include establishing an active and independent board of directors with defined roles, internal monitoring systems, and external reviews. Simple software is low cost and can improve these processes. Reputations can also be enhanced, and funding opportunities increased, through independent audits and greater transparency.

Relationships with policymakers. In order to be effective, policy institutes must respond to demand and build trust. They need to maintain links with government departments and political leaders without losing their independence. These are often personal ties, although, over time, more formally defined relationships may become possible.

Skills and capacity. Relevant experience and practical knowledge are needed not only for conducting research but also for identifying issues to address, assessing and summarizing available literature, communicating research findings to non-specialist audiences, and managing policy engagement. These skills and knowledge are new, and therefore in shortage in Myanmar, although returning expatriates can help fill some gaps. Policy institutes may need to commission relevant research or form partnerships with other national and/or international organizations when they do not have the capacity to conduct it themselves. Staff should include senior experts, capable mid-level staff, and a wider pool of competent junior staff. The engagement of international or expatriate staff who can work alongside national staff and help build the skills of new researchers is likely to be essential in many cases at this early phase in the development of policy institutes.

Maintaining research quality. Some questions for research institutes to consider: Is the research rigorous and credible? How are you checking the quality of products? Is your training and mentoring consistent and productive? What support can be provided to policy processes? Other than written paper reports, how can research be effectively shared to inform policy decisions? How can policy research support also be provided to the new state/region governments and key ministries?

Using foreign assistance effectively. Foreign aid can be valuable, but it needs careful handling. Policy institutes may end up focusing on how to gain funding rather than responding to demands for information from the government or the public. Aid recipients need to articulate clearly the support or the skills that they need.

## Recommendations for the Government of Myanmar and international funding agencies

- Meeting the needs of the new government. New ministers and members of parliament need reliable, straightforward information on important policy issues and on how policy processes work.
- Linking government with policy institutes. Researchers, advisors, and policymakers can gradually build on personal links and short-term policy research to establish longer-term engagement between institutions.
- Encourage the development of policy units within government agencies, as well as independent institutes. A diversity of policy research institutes is needed both inside and outside of government to provide quality inputs and a wide range of perspectives for effective policymaking.
- Work at different parts of the policy cycle. As well as conducting research, policy institutes can support other parts of the policy process such as formulating policy options, sharing information, facilitating discussion, and monitoring policy implementation.
- Aim for “good enough” information. Policy inputs can use new and existing data, building on international comparisons and assessments of work completed. In many cases, the most valuable steps for policymakers involve briefings and summaries based on existing information rather than launching ambitious new research agendas.
- Pilot tools or approaches to policy engagement for wide adoption. Consider how initial approaches to research and to consultation can be adopted more widely. Successful examples can be documented and shared.
- Funders can support the capacity of policy institutes. Longer-term funding to policy institutes that covers some core costs and promotes institutional strengthening is needed in addition to assistance for specific outputs.
- Support networking among policy institutes, NGOs with research programs, and university departments. Regular interactions encourage knowledge sharing and collaboration on research agendas.
- Improve access to information. Making new and existing information more available to researchers and the public will help ensure that future policymakers receive good advice. Government departments can make more data available, and policy institutes also have an important role to play in generating additional data as well as the analysis necessary for just and effective policies.

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## About The Asia Foundation

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### The Asia Foundation

Improving Lives, Expanding Opportunities

21, Bo Yar Zar Street | Ward 14, Kyauk Kone | Yankin Township | Yangon, Myanmar

Tel: (+95) 01 570 619 | Fax: (+95) 01 566 701

[myanmar.general@asiafoundation.org](mailto:myanmar.general@asiafoundation.org)

[www.asiafoundation.org](http://www.asiafoundation.org)