

# ACTORS, ISSUES, AND OPPORTUNITIES: ASSESSING THE POLICY ENVIRONMENT

*Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country.*

Excerpted from Article 21, Universal Declaration of Human Rights  
U.N. General Assembly, December 10, 1948

## Introduction

A critical element in the success of any advocacy effort is a thorough understanding of the opportunities that exist for influencing the policy process—nationally, regionally, or locally. In Section I, participants worked through the steps necessary to put together an effective network. Now, network members will learn to determine how—given the realities of their particular political environment—the policy process works and what they can realistically expect to achieve at the policy level. This assessment is important because it focuses the network’s efforts on what is potentially attainable.

Policymaking—a course of action dealing with a problem or matter of concern—occurs within a web of interacting forces. Involved are multiple sources of information, complex power relations, and changing institutional arrangements. These factors feed into three main processes: problem recognition, the formation and refinement of policy proposals, and politics.

Some issues are probably settled by facts, analysis, and persuasion. Others are determined by vote, bargaining, or delegation to someone in authority. In all cases, decision makers are generally forced to make policy choices under conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty. Therefore, policy analysis demands a focus on what is actually done as opposed to what is proposed or intended.

Policies create a framework by which government affects the behavior of millions of people. For FP/RH, policies are tools to promote access to services or to deny, obstruct, or condition the availability of services. By providing special clinic and education services to teens, for example, a government demonstrates sensitivity to adolescent sexuality; by restricting certain medical procedures such as nonphysician insertion of IUDs, a government erects barriers to reproductive health services.

Effective policy action begins with study and research. It may not be easy to determine the processes by which a country formulates and implements reproductive health policies, particularly if the government’s decision making is complex or in transition from a top-down to a more decentralized process. It is important, however, to identify as accurately as possible the various factors that affect policy development decisions so that appropriate strategies can be adopted to influence the policymaking process. Identifying these factors will help the network use its resources in a manner that maximizes impact.

The first step in the process is to review how the policy process works in the network's particular setting. In Unit 1, workshop participants will combine their knowledge about how policy is formulated and implemented, delineate the steps in the policy formulation process, and develop a visual map to illustrate how policy decisions are crafted in their country.

In Unit 2, participants will move from the general policy arena to the FP/RH policy environment. They will assess the current political climate and refine the policy map to reflect information about how the government's priorities are determined for FP/RH policy. Participants will also look for linkages with other policy areas that can potentially affect the network's priorities.

Identifying relevant issues for the network's advocacy efforts is the focus of Unit 3. Participants will rank reproductive health issues for their network's advocacy efforts and then match the issues with perceived opportunities. The final activity will help participants reach agreement on a specific issue for their network's advocacy campaign.