



Bridging Public Opinion and Policy:

*Key Insights from
a Mixed Methods
Analysis*

Bridging Public Opinion and Policy: Key Insights from a Mixed Methods Analysis

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About MSDI

Monash Sustainable Development Institute (MSDI) is a world leading institute bringing about change all over the world through pioneering research, education and innovation. Part of Monash University, we have 200+ academic and professional staff and draw on expertise across 10 faculties to respond to some of the biggest environmental, economic and social issues, to build a healthier, stronger, and more sustainable world. MSDI works with policymakers, philanthropists and practitioners to devise practical solutions to some of the most pressing problems faced by Australia and its region. Leveraging our expertise in systems and behavioural change, we shape policy, build capacity, and develop strategies that unpack complex issues, test innovative solutions, and support systems transformations for sustainable development.

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Introduction

As reflections on the COVID-19 response surface, there is a growing demand for greater transparency and understanding of how evidence shapes policymaking. For example, the conclusions drawn in the Fault Lines review of the nation's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted issues such as the lack of transparency surrounding decision-making processes and ambiguities regarding the evidence used to justify government interventions.¹

Recently, the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, in partnership with the Australian Public Service Commission, commissioned the Monash Sustainable Development Institute to explore how public opinion data (POD) is used to inform policy development. This initiative, titled 'Bridging Public Opinion and Policy: A Mixed-Methods Analysis' aimed to pinpoint best practices for effectively leveraging POD into policymaking.

For the purposes of this research, POD was defined as the *aggregate of individual attitudes, beliefs and self-reported behaviours on a particular topic that is representative of a specific community or population*. Notably, our definition of POD excludes qualitative approaches such as focus groups and political polling which is designed to focus on political viewpoints and is partisan driven.

The “Bridging Public Opinion and Policy” project is structured around four key research activities, each designed to assess the impact, strengths, and limitations of POD in decision-making:

1. **Rapid Evidence Review:** This systematic review examined the literature to understand how POD was used to inform policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. **Analysis of the Pulse Survey administered by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet:** This research activity, aimed to understand the relevance of POD during the pandemic and its influence on decision-making, using the Pulse Survey as a case study.
3. **Practice Review:** This review explored broader practices in Australia regarding the use and impact of POD in both crisis (COVID-19) and ‘business as usual’ contexts, we conducted one-on-one interviews with eight people representing the policymaking, politician and social researcher perspectives.
4. **Deliberative Dialogue:** Informed by the insights from the previous components, this expert-facilitated workshop aimed to collaboratively identify and establish best practices for effectively leveraging the use of POD.

Initially, the project was designed to focus on the use of POD in crisis contexts, with the COVID-19 period providing a rich backdrop for exploration. Insights from the evidence review and Pulse Survey Analysis highlighted the relevance and usefulness of POD during crises, while also uncovering nuanced challenges in its application. These challenges not only pertained to the practical and technical hurdles

¹ Peter Shergold, Jillian Broadbent, Isobel Marshall, and Peter Varghese. *Fault Lines: An independent review into Australia's response to COVID-19*. Available here: <https://www.paulramsayfoundation.org.au/news-resources/fault-lines-an-independent-review-into-australias-response-to-covid-19>

of collecting and using POD, but also to how its integration is influenced by prevailing cultures within the public sector and beyond. This led to a broader examination of POD's role in a wider range of policy-making scenarios, beyond just crisis response. Consequently, this expanded focus was incorporated into the Practice Review and Deliberative Dialogue.

Our research findings reinforce the existing literature on the critical role of POD in policymaking, particularly as a means to engage citizens and develop more effective and legitimate policies. In Australia, our study highlights how POD was pivotal in shaping responses during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating its essential role in dynamic and uncertain policy environments. Despite its contributions, POD's role was seldom publicly recognised as a key evidence input. Our research delves into the practical and nuanced challenges and dynamics within the Australian public sector, such as the tensions between the political use of POD and its impartial application. By bringing these issues to light, this research initiates a conversation on strategies to address these challenges and enhance the use of POD. The practical recommendations that emerged aim to spark further dialogue and exploration, contributing to more effective policymaking.

The sections below offer a concise overview of the research activities conducted and the key insights gained. Each summary outlines the objectives, methodology, and main findings of the research. Annex I presents practical guidance that synthesises the best practices identified through the research.

The full reports for the [Rapid Evidence Review \(Activity 1\)](#), [the Pulse Survey Analysis \(Activity 2\)](#), and the [Practice Review \(Activity 3\)](#) are available as part of ANZSOG's [Research Insights](#) series.

Summary of Activity 1: Use of Public Opinion Data to Inform COVID-19 Policymaking, a Rapid Evidence Review²

Objective

To conduct a rapid review of the literature to address the question: How was public opinion data (POD) used to inform policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

A range of academic and policy databases were searched from the year 2019 onwards. Studies eligible for inclusion were those that had explicit focus and/or descriptions of how public opinion data was used to formulate COVID-19 policy.

Key findings

- From 2032 citations, only three relevant studies were identified – a large survey of over 30,000 people in the Netherlands focusing on relaxation of lockdown measures; a smaller survey by the same research group pertaining to ongoing COVID management scenarios; and a social media analysis of over 150,000 social media data points in Wuhan, China examining responses to a suite of transport/lockdown policies.
- The studies reported that their approaches were generally effective and acceptable for the purpose of gathering POD to inform policymaking. Importantly, there is also evidence from these studies that subsequent policy decisions were influenced by the POD collected.
- Related studies which did not present explicit descriptions of COVID-19 POD use outlined the value of POD in more general terms. The use of representative surveys enables a range of policy options and scenarios to be presented to citizens. Additionally, information about attitudes and beliefs can be gathered and analysed according to geographic location, demographic and other categories. The resulting insights from citizens have clear potential to inform policy deliberations.
- Although little empirical evidence exists, one included study outlined a strong ethical rationale for use of POD in crisis situations:
 - “[I]nvolving citizens will improve the quality of government decisions ...
 - involving citizens in policymaking is ‘the right thing to do’ in a democracy, as citizens should have a say in (governmental) decisions that will deeply affect their lives and society ...
 - public participation exercises ... aim to achieve a particular predefined end, such as increasing citizens’ acceptance of COVID-19 policies or restoring public trust”.³

² Peter Bragge, Paul Kellner, Diki Tsering, and Veronica Delafosse. *Use of Public Opinion Data to Inform COVID-19 Policymaking: ANZSOG Research Insights No. 31*. Melbourne: ANZSOG. February 2024.

<https://doi.org/10.54810/JGMN5776>

³ Niek Mouter, Jose Ignacio Hernandez, Anatol Valerian Itten. “Public participation in crisis policymaking: How 30,000 Dutch citizens advised their government on relaxing COVID-19 lockdown measures”, PLoS ONE 16(5): e0250614. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250614>

Conclusion

Despite COVID-19 being the most significant public health challenge in a century, little published evidence was identified that explicitly linked POD to policy decision-making. However, it is acknowledged that published research and other reports have under-reported actual POD use, potentially reflecting a lack of transparency in explicitly reporting the link between POD and policy in a crisis context. To fully understand the link between POD and policymaking, further exploration is needed regarding the purpose of POD (including the specific policy objectives it addresses and the questions it aims to answer), the process (how POD is designed, collected, and disseminated), and the impact (how POD is utilised and its influence on policymaking).

Summary of Activity 2: Insights to Action: An Analysis of the COVID-19 Prime Minister and Cabinet Pulse Survey⁴

Objective

First, to conduct a retrospective analysis of the national COVID-19 Pulse Survey implemented by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) from March 2021 to March 2022. The survey collected nationwide data on public attitudes and behaviours, offering insights into the public's response to the pandemic, in particular attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccines. Second, it explored how the insights from the Pulse Survey influenced policymaking by examining its design process and its role in informing decisions or shaping policy responses.

Method

We conducted a multilevel regression analysis to explore the evolution of vaccine hesitancy across various demographics over time. In addition, we conducted five semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of public servants closely involved in the Pulse Survey's development, implementation, and the subsequent utilisation of its findings.

Key findings

- Data on vaccination attitudes illustrate that POD is a dynamic feedback mechanism during periods of rapidly shifting public opinions. Our analysis suggests the two most prevalent types of vaccine hesitancy in Australia were hesitancy due to confidence and convenience. Demographic factors such as gender and age were associated with vaccine hesitancy and shifted over time at different pace. Geographical differences also emerged, highlighting the influence of local contexts on public attitudes towards vaccination.
- The analysis was constrained by limited availability of key demographic variables. For example, we were unable to assess the relationships between cultural background, socioeconomic factors, and vaccine hesitancy, which are crucial to inform communication strategies and health responses. Furthermore, the survey framework for assessing vaccination attitudes was only partially aligned with established theoretical frameworks. This suggests that while the survey was designed with expert input, it could benefit from a stronger grounding in evidence-based methodologies.
- The Pulse Survey emerged to offer a reliable and comparative analysis of public attitudes on an array of topics across various states and jurisdictions without a specific policy focus or aim. The process of designing, implementing, and disseminating the survey illustrated an anticipatory and agile approach to gather information in response to the crisis context.
- These anticipatory approaches may conflict with methodological approaches to POD. The Pulse Survey illustrates this tension. While business-as-usual methods emphasise meticulous design, problem definition, and consistency, the urgent demands of the COVID-19 pandemic required swift, adaptable strategies. Although an anticipatory approach helped to understand the situation, it did not evolve to provide more in-depth insights to influence decisions, highlighting the need for more focused, actionable insights.

⁴ Alejandra Mendoza Alcántara and Alexander Saeri. *Insights to Action: An Analysis of the COVID-19 Pulse Survey*: ANZSOG Research Insights No. 33. Melbourne: ANZSOG. July 2024.
<https://doi.org/10.54810/YPUA1328>

- The team responsible for the survey lacked visibility into how the data was being utilised. Additional interviews revealed that while the data provided benchmarking information against other states, especially those lacking POD capabilities, it was not representative of their communities in order to shape health responses. However, it did assist decision-makers in understanding their counterparts' positions during National Cabinet meetings, even when those counterparts did not acknowledge or share the insights gathered from their POD collection efforts.
- The survey insights were deemed less relevant at the Commonwealth level due to its inherently limited role in the health response. This underscores the need for robust feedback mechanisms in a crisis context to ensure that data collected effectively addresses policy needs.

Conclusion

POD is a crucial tool for informing policymaking in crisis contexts, though its effectiveness is contingent upon factors such as its fit for purpose, credibility, and soundness. Our findings suggest that leveraging POD effectively in such contexts requires balancing agile and innovative approaches with more deliberate and methodical processes. The inherent tensions between standard practices and the unique demands of a crisis were evident in every phase of the survey's implementation. This analysis underscores the need for further discussion among practitioners and policymakers on how to bridge these gaps and enhance the use of POD in future crises.

Key areas for further discussion include:

- **Establishing Robust Feedback Mechanisms:** Ensuring that POD aligns with decision-makers' needs during crises to provide relevant and timely insights.
- **Balancing Methodical and Agile Approaches:** Maintaining credibility and reliability in data collection while being responsive to the urgent needs for actionable insights.
- **Strengthening Relationships Between Researchers and Policymakers:** Facilitating collaborative partnerships that leverage evidence for effective problem-solving.

Additionally, our research surfaced that while various jurisdictions collected valuable POD data that influenced health responses, these insights were not consistently shared during National Cabinet meetings. This lack of consistency highlighted significant gaps in acknowledgment and transparency regarding the role that POD played in decision-making.

Summary of Activity 3: Public Opinion Data and Policymaking During COVID-19 and Beyond: Insights from Interviews Across Policy and Politics⁵

Objective

To gain a grounded insight into the practical applications and implications of POD in policymaking, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

One-on-one, semi-structured interviews with eight individuals with in-depth knowledge and experience in the use of POD in policymaking. Participants included five federal/state Deputy Secretaries, a former Minister, and two senior social researchers. The interviews covered both COVID-19 and 'business as usual' contexts. Transcripts were analysed using inductive qualitative techniques.

Key findings

Insights were gathered across four broad thematic areas.

1. The Role of Public Opinion Data

Three key use cases for the collection of POD were identified:

- To *understand* community beliefs and attitudes, where POD informs the problem definition and therefore policy development.
- To identify ways to *influence* changes in behaviour, beliefs and attitudes, where POD data is key in designing behaviour change strategies, shaping effective policy narratives and communication strategies.
- To *test* social licence, where POD data is used to assess the public's acceptance and support of policy initiatives, ensuring that proposed policies are socially sustainable and publicly endorsed.

Respondents highlighted POD as especially critical in addressing complex problems during pivotal policy development moments, in crisis contexts, when other data sources fail to capture nuanced impacts across diverse groups, or when dealing with highly contentious issues. The uncertainty and unpredictability of COVID-19 provided a unique licence to gather and use POD, marking a significant departure from usual business practices.

2. Perceptions of the Purpose of POD

From a politician's perspective, POD is crucial not only for shaping campaign strategies—informing "the what"—but also for understanding and influencing public sentiment while in office, which informs "the how." In contrast, public servants primarily view POD as a tool to shape service delivery and support policy implementation based on evidence-driven directives, such as promoting vaccination uptake. Although public servants are mandated to use POD impartially, in practice, this

⁵ Peter Bragge and Alejandra Mendoza Alcántara. *Public Opinion Data and Policymaking During COVID-19 and Beyond: Insights from Interviews Across Policy and Politics: ANZSOG Research Insights No.36*. Melbourne: ANZSOG. October 2024. <https://doi.org/10.54810/UJUO6707>

distinction can become blurred. The intended use of POD to reinforce clear policy directions occasionally overlaps with broader strategic applications, potentially undermining the effectiveness of POD in policy development by obscuring its primary objectives.

3. The Process of Designing, Collecting and Disseminating Public Opinion Data for Decision-Making

Clearly defining POD objectives and engaging key decision-makers and social researchers was described as essential to ensure the resulting insights are directly applicable, actionable, and focused on the relevant policy questions. Collaborating with external stakeholders, or commissioning work, has proven beneficial, particularly in crisis situations and to bridge internal capability gaps. Credible data and sound methodology were often mentioned as critical for integration into decision-making processes, a finding consistent with the Pulse Survey Analysis. The impartiality of POD suppliers was also identified as key for maintaining the integrity and trustworthiness of POD insights.

4. The Impact of Public Opinion Data in Policymaking

Two examples of an explicit link between POD and a policy-making outcome were identified. First, POD enabled the pinpointing of a specific community with high vaccination hesitancy enabling a targeted response. Second, POD shaped public communication strategies and messaging. It was also emphasised that POD was one of many inputs shaping decisions, and never the primary driver of evidence in decision-making processes. However, it was also noted that the use of POD as an evidence input was rarely acknowledged within government circles or publicly. This reveals a notable tension between transparency and accountability, which foster public trust in the policy-making process, and the need for discretion, which guards against accusations of being 'opinion-driven'.

Conclusion

The practice review revealed clear potential for POD to meaningfully inform policymaking. It provides key insights into when POD is most useful, the factors that enable its uptake and influence in policy-making processes. However, it also highlighted significant tensions due to varying interpretations of POD's purpose by public servants and politicians. While the theoretical purpose of POD is well-defined, in practice, it can be nuanced and may undermine the potential role POD could play in the policy development processes. Moreover, this often results in a lack of transparency in how POD is used and reported, both within and outside of government. These findings underscore the need for a considered discussion on how to navigate these sensitivities so that POD can add value to the policy development process, enhance its effectiveness, and ultimately strengthen public trust.

Summary of Activity 4: Bridging Public Opinion and Policy: A Stakeholder Dialogue

Objective

To convene a diverse group of stakeholders – including policymakers, strategists, and social researchers – to collaboratively engage in a problem-solving dialogue. Discussions centred on the contexts when POD is most useful, the challenges public servants encounter, political and methodological considerations, and best practices and risk mitigation strategies for effectively using POD to support evidence-based policymaking.

Methodology

The dialogue consisted of an expert-facilitated, online guided workshop with 13 participants who have significant experience in using Public Opinion Data (POD). Participants included senior public servants (EL2 and SES Band 1), senior political advisors, and social researchers from both within and outside the public service. The discussion questions were developed based on insights from previous research and identified gaps. To ensure comprehensive understanding and alignment on the topics, participants were provided with a primer paper prior to the dialogue.

Key findings

- POD plays a crucial role in understanding public sentiment, challenging conventional wisdom, and testing policymakers' assumptions. It serves as a tool to identify barriers and opportunities for influencing public opinion, facilitating targeted and effective change initiatives.
- The dialogue has highlighted POD's value not only in crisis situations, like the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in “routine” policy development. There was consensus that POD is particularly valuable in contexts where dominant narratives — whether media-driven or dictated by a few powerful voices — prevail, where misinformation is widespread, or topics are controversial and contested. In these scenarios, POD brings forward unheard voices and offers a more representative view of public sentiment.
- This representative understanding is even more crucial when policies target or impact underrepresented groups, such as vulnerable or hard-to-reach populations. POD is also essential in understanding the impacts of policies when there are differentiated impacts or underlying differences across demographic groups.
- Discussions revealed overlapping concerns between public servants and political advisors about the politicisation of POD. Public servants are focused on how POD usage is perceived by stakeholders and the public—whether as impartial or as “stage-managing” the government agenda, especially in contentious topics. In contrast, political advisors are concerned about the reputational risks and potential controversies if the data does not align with expected outcomes. Both perspectives need to be carefully considered throughout the POD decision-making process.
- Transparency in decision-making processes that guide the purpose, design, collection, and use of POD was agreed upon as essential for establishing trust in its legitimacy and reducing the risk of politicisation. Politically, while the incentives might be less if data do not support the intended narrative, it was noted that POD could help facilitate discussions on unpopular

opinions to navigate public opinion more effectively. This openness not only normalises the issues at stake but also fosters more informed and constructive public conversations.

- Among the identified pitfalls that could undermine the effective use of POD were capability gaps in designing, collecting, and disseminating data appropriately, with critical issues often arising at the design stage. Furthermore, failure to integrate POD with other evidence inputs or solely relying on POD was another major risk identified. Additionally, misuse of data and misinterpretations – such as data taken out of context or leaked for political purposes– were noted. Other concerns included a lack of leadership appetite to act on POD insights or to steer the course of action based on POD insights, and trade-offs between timelines and budgets that significantly affect the scope, rigour and credibility of the data collected.
- Most participants agreed on the need for a strategic, rigorous and deliberate approach to leverage POD effectively, ensuring that practices are well-aligned with policy goals and grounded in robust, transparent methodologies. However, organisational cultures significantly influence how these practices are implemented. Some participants suggested that to normalise the use of POD in policymaking – a “muscle” that needs strengthening – public servants could start with less contentious issues and gradually move to more complex or contested ones.

Conclusion

The perspectives gathered through the dialogue aimed to bring a balanced overview of the value and risks of POD and strategies to leverage it effectively. POD was highlighted as a stabilising mechanism in policymaking, to counter dominant narratives and amplify lesser-heard voices, especially in high-stakes, contested environments where misinformation can prevail. However, the use of POD comes with a high risk of politicisation, particularly in dealing with controversial issues, underscoring the need for credibility, soundness, and transparency in its application. It is also essential to carefully consider the political context in which POD is being used, as understanding these dynamics can help mitigate biases and understand the relevant trade-offs.

Rigour is paramount and needs to be supported by an evidence-based design process that includes clear policy objectives, well-defined methodologies, and integration with other data sources. This process should also involve collaboration with individuals possessing the necessary skills and expertise. Furthermore, transparency is crucial not only in disseminating results but throughout the entire process of designing, collecting, and sharing insights. This comprehensive transparency builds public trust and reduces the risk of data being used and manipulated for political purposes. Such openness is essential for establishing POD as a reliable evidence input and for fostering informed and constructive public discourse.

Conclusion and future directions

This project has shed light on the use of POD in policymaking within Australia, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and in 'business as usual' contexts. It has identified some of the nuances of POD's practical application within the Australian public sector. The findings from our research activities reveal several intersecting themes. First, POD is acknowledged as a valuable evidence input; by integrating public perspectives with other data, it supports the formulation of more effective and legitimate policies. It proved particularly useful during the pandemic, demonstrating its value in dynamic and uncertain scenarios.

Second, there are significant tensions due to varying interpretations of POD's purpose by public servants and politicians. Although public servants are mandated to use POD impartially, in practice, this distinction can become blurred, undermining the potential role that POD could play in the policy development processes.

Third, there is often a reluctance to use or be transparent about POD, primarily due to its perceived nature as being solely opinion-driven, lacking impartiality or due to political risks. The risk of politicisation is higher in complex situations such as contested public debates, one of the many contexts where POD's input is most useful.

Fourth, the effectiveness of POD in informing policymaking hinges on a rigorous approach to design, collect and disseminate POD insights. Clarity on its objectives, credibility and soundness are key conditions to ensure that POD is fit for purpose.

Fifth, the thoughtful and strategic integration of POD into decision-making processes is essential for navigating the political nuances associated with its use. Such integration is underpinned by a rigorous design approach and a collaborative, transparent management process. Clearly articulating the scope and purpose of POD is crucial not only for maintaining its impartial application but also for ensuring it aligns with policy goals and evidence directives. Furthermore, a deep understanding of the political context is needed to anticipate and manage potential risks and trade-offs. Working closely with ministers' offices to define the scope and parameters of POD ensures that its application is both focused and attuned to political realities, thereby enhancing its utility in informing policymaking.

The attached practice note (at Annex I) details key strategies to tackle some of these issues based on the best practices identified throughout our research.

In addition, the research sheds light on broader systemic issues, such as the need for a cultural shift both within and outside the public service to normalise and legitimise the use of POD as part of the decision-making process. For instance, the perceived value and application of POD varies across government levels and portfolios. For example, some potential interviewees deferred our conversations to their communications departments, underscoring a common but narrow perception of POD as merely a tool for shaping communication campaigns. Its role and value, however, extend far beyond that, necessitating a broader recognition and strategic use. This shift will require capability building, role modelling, and appropriate incentives, such as enforcing transparency against established best practices and checklists.

To support this shift, implementing strategies like building a community of practice, conducting annual reviews on the use of POD, and iteratively testing and refining practical guidance could ensure that the integration of POD into policymaking continues to improve and align with evolving best practices.

Moreover, further reflection and the identification of best practices are necessary to determine how to balance methodological rigour with the need for adaptive responses in crisis situations. Proactively, identifying strategies based on lessons learned from previous crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can enhance the effective use of POD in fast-paced contexts. Establishing a community of practice or an advisory group can serve not only as a platform to develop these strategies but also as a valuable resource when such situations arise.

Finally, understanding the influence of POD in decision-making proved challenging. This difficulty underscores a broader issue: the absence of formal mechanisms to integrate various types of evidence in the policy-making process. Establishing clear pathways for such integration would not only illuminate how decisions are actually shaped by evidence, including POD, but would also significantly enhance transparency. By formalising how evidence is incorporated into policy formulation, the specific roles and impacts of different data and evidence sources, including POD, can be more clearly defined and understood. Such clarity and openness are essential for advancing evidence-based policymaking, ensuring that all inputs, particularly those as critical as POD, are effectively leveraged to shape public policy.

Annex: Practice Note

The annexed document, overleaf, has been written by the researchers as a distillation of practical guidance for the use of POD that emerged from the project's 4 research activities.

The Practice Note is intended as a standalone summary of high-level advice for public servants looking to incorporate POD evidence into the policymaking process. It outlines the main uses of POD, known challenges and strategies for overcoming them, and key considerations for using POD in crisis contexts.

ANZSOG

BRIDGING PUBLIC OPINION AND POLICYMAKING: A PRACTICE NOTE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We would like acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which this work was created, the Wurundjeri people and the Ngunnawal people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

AIM OF THIS PRACTICE NOTE

This note offers guidance for public servants on effectively leveraging public opinion data (POD) to support evidence-based decision-making.

The aim is to empower public servants by identifying and addressing common barriers to its use, and providing practical advice on:

- What role POD plays in policymaking
- When POD is most useful
- How to navigate common challenges associated with POD usage.

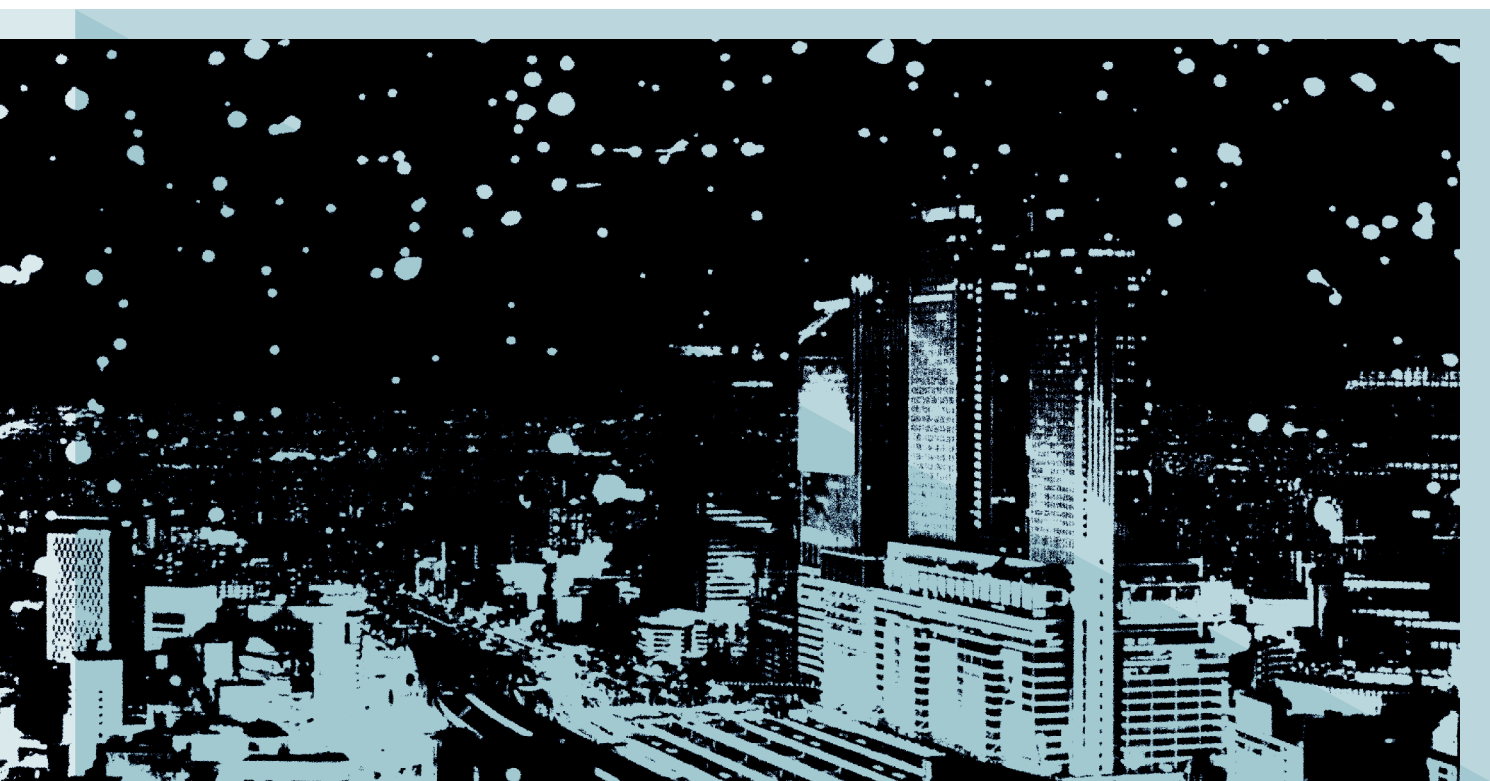
This practice note emerges from research conducted by the Monash Sustainable Development Institute, commissioned by the Australia and New Zealand School of Government and the Australian Public Sector Commission, aiming to provide recommendations on how to leverage POD effectively to inform policymaking.

WHAT IS PUBLIC OPINION DATA?

POD is a means to enable the government to directly incorporate the voices of communities in decision-making. This data can be sourced through a diversity of methods including surveys, town halls, stakeholder consultations, focus groups, and co-design processes that facilitate public engagement in policymaking.

For the purposes of this note, POD is defined as quantitative data capturing *the aggregate of individual attitudes, beliefs, and self-reported behaviours on specific topics that are representative of a certain community or population*. This excludes qualitative approaches to POD such as focus groups (from which collective views cannot be inferred) and political polling (which is designed to focus on political viewpoints and is partisan driven).

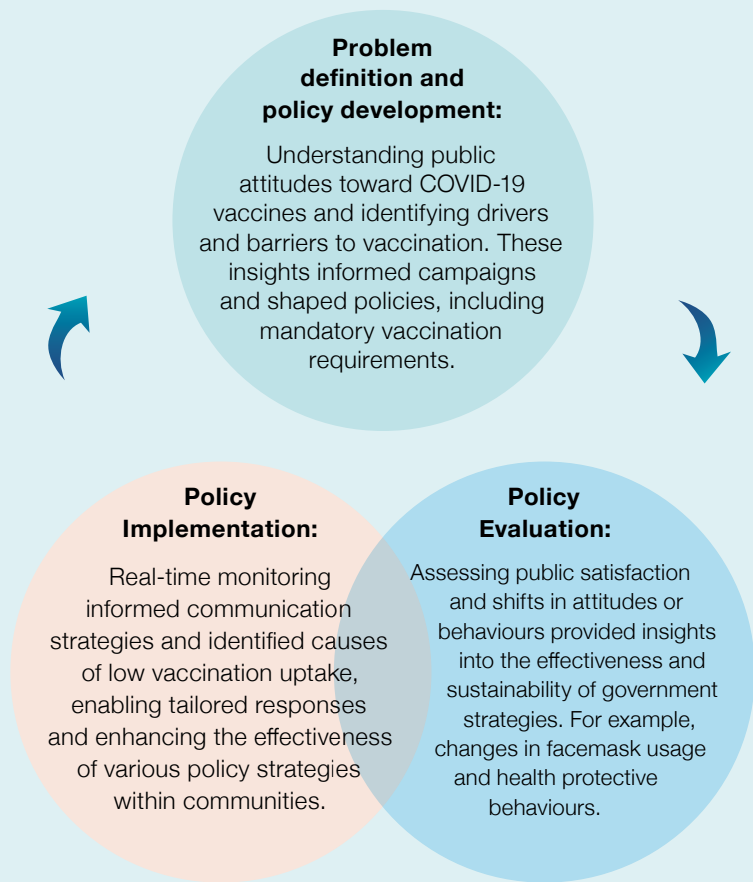
POD collected through surveys, offers a rapid method to tap into collective views by reaching a large group of people. If designed well, these surveys can provide objective insights into representative views of the public. When integrated with other forms of evidence, POD can significantly enhance the capacity to understand problems and develop effective, responsive and legitimate policies and programs.



HOW IS PUBLIC OPINION DATA USED IN POLICYMAKING?

1 TO UNDERSTAND

community beliefs and attitudes, where POD informs the problem definition, policy development, implementation and evaluation of a policy. Examples of POD Use in the COVID-19 Pandemic:



2 TO TEST

social licence, where POD is used to assess the community readiness and perspectives on policy initiatives, ensuring that policies are socially sustainable and responsive to the social context.

3 TO INFLUENCE

behavioural and attitudinal change, where POD is used to identify potential strategies to change behaviour, particularly in contexts where policy objectives require changes in collective attitudes or actions to be effective.

WHEN IS PUBLIC OPINION DATA MOST USEFUL? EXPLORING KEY CONTEXTS



Fast-Changing and Uncertain Environments:

In situations like crises (e.g., a pandemic), where conditions evolve rapidly and uncertainty prevails, POD supplies timely and crucial data that supports immediate and effective policy responses.



Knowledge vacuums: where there is a knowledge vacuum (ie - we know we don't know) or where assumptions need to be tested (ie - we assume we know how people think but we might be wrong).



Dominant Narratives: POD counters biases and amplifies quieter voices in scenarios where public discourse is otherwise dominated by a few loud voices from within or outside the public sector, or by media-driven narratives. POD contributes to a more balanced and representative view.



Differentiated Policy Impacts: POD is helpful in identifying and understanding the varied effects of policies across different demographic groups, and particularly useful in scenarios involving significant trade-offs.



Underrepresented populations: For policies targeting or affecting hard-to-reach or at-risk groups, POD provides insights from communities, often overlooked in other generalised and aggregated data sources.



Contested Narratives: In situations where topics are controversial and widely contested, POD provides crucial insights into public perspectives, assisting policymakers in understanding and addressing prevalent misconceptions.

KEY CONDITIONS FOR THE EFFECTIVE USE OF PUBLIC OPINION DATA AS AN EVIDENCE INPUT:

The rationale, design, collection and use of POD should follow rigorous ethical and strategic guidelines to maintain its integrity and effectiveness in decision-making processes. There are three conditions that POD should satisfy to establish its legitimacy:

- **Credibility:** Determined by a clearly articulated purpose, transparent sponsorship, the research team's professional integrity and qualifications, and the reputation of the survey firm (if applicable).¹
- **Methodological Soundness:** Determined by the technical rigour of the survey to ensure alignment with its purpose and that it represents the population of interest. It considers factors such as sampling methodologies, coverage, response rates, and measurement properties. Addressing these considerations typically requires the involvement of expert sampling statisticians and survey methodologists.²
- **Transparency:** Determined by the clear reporting of methods, results, and survey limitations. Transparency also extends to the decision - making processes that guide the purpose, design, collection, and use of the data, which contributes to build trust and prevents manipulation of the data for political purposes.

¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2022. *Measurement and Analysis of Public Opinion: An Analytic Framework*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/26390>.

² Ibid.

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN USING PUBLIC OPINION DATA

1. POLITICISATION OF PUBLIC OPINION DATA

What is it? POD risks being used as a political tool, where findings can spark intense debates, question proposed policies, or contradict established hypotheses, potentially undermining political reputations and policy agendas. This challenge is further compounded by decision-makers' fears of being perceived as solely opinion-driven. These risks may discourage ministers from deciding to use POD for decision-making and discourage an authorising environment for systematically collecting POD as an essential input for policymaking. Moreover, the fear of political exploitation encourages the non-disclosure of POD usage, thereby increasing the risk of political exploitation and public distrust.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

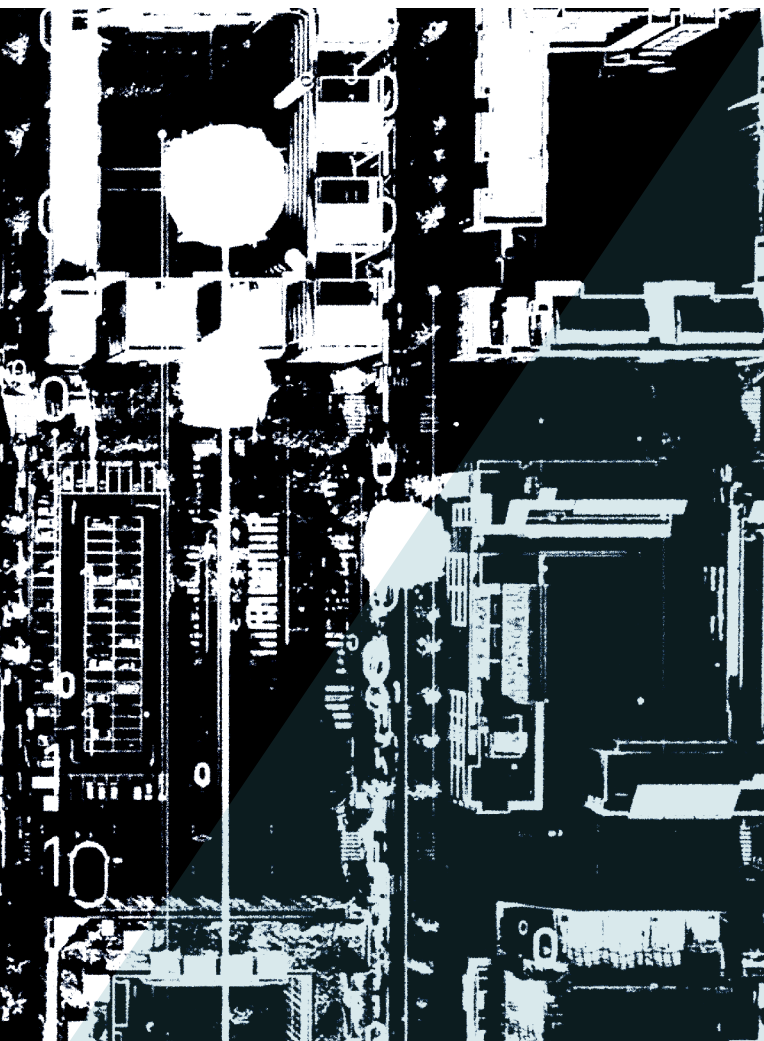
Work closely with minister's staff: Collaborate with ministers' staff to define the scope and parameters of POD, ensuring that its application is not only focused and aligned with evidence directives but also attuned to current political realities.

Enhance your political awareness: Stay attuned to the evolving political context in which elected representatives operate and proactively prepare viable alternative approaches. This strategic awareness will enable you to better align POD needs with political realities, enhancing its receptiveness in policymaking.

Frame research objectives appropriately: Ensure that research objectives are carefully articulated to identify underlying drivers and barriers rather than assessing broad views on policies. For example, rather than assessing public agreement with mandatory vaccinations, focus on understanding perceptions of the virus's risks and attitudes towards vaccines. This approach minimises the risk of politicisation by steering clear of questions that might be perceived as seeking to validate governmental policies.

Discuss POD needs early in policy development: Consider POD in early stages of policy development to get a better understanding of the problem and its underlying drivers. Starting early ensures that findings are available in time to influence policy formulation and before policy decisions are solidified. This minimises the risk of findings contradicting a determined course of action.

Evaluate Alternative Data Sources: assess if the required insights can be obtained from existing data or other readily available sources, such as administrative records.



2. FEAR OF PERCEIVED POLITICAL BIAS

What is it? Commonwealth public servants are bound by a set of values outlined in the *Public Service Act 1999*, which mandates that advice provided to the government under the value of Impartiality be 'based on the best available evidence'. POD can be a powerful type of evidence. In practice, however, the impartial use of POD can easily become intertwined with broader political strategic applications. This can both compromise its effectiveness as a tool for policymaking and undermine its credibility as an evidence source.

Fear of perceived impartiality may deter public servants from utilising POD even when it presents valuable insights. Moreover, to avoid political sensitivities, surveys might exclude specific questions or demographic details, leading to a generalised approach that overlooks nuanced data crucial for understanding the issue at hand.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Adopt a transparent and methodical approach to ensure POD is aligned with an evidence directive and build trust in the process.

Purpose

- **Articulate the purpose and value of POD:** Clearly articulate the purpose behind collecting POD – identify the specific knowledge gaps it aims to address and explain how POD will contribute to understanding policy issues and informing potential solutions. Understanding its intended use and how POD will be used along with other evidence inputs is crucial. A clear purpose contributes to aligning strategies that use POD as an objective tool within a broader evidence-based framework.
- **Clearly define research objectives:** Clearly articulate the research objectives to ensure they are focused on specific policy issues rather than general public sentiment.

FOR EXAMPLE

If the policy objective is to reach a 90% vaccination uptake, define the goal of POD research as understanding factors influencing individuals' decisions to vaccinate, rather than assessing whether people agree with the policy. When testing social licence or implementation mechanisms, frame the objectives around gathering insights into specific experiences and expectations rather than directly assessing approval or disapproval. This careful definition of objectives helps avoid the grey area where your POD might inadvertently gauge broad political opinion, contributing to the research remaining impartial and relevant to policy needs.

Process

- **Consider co-design and collaborative approaches:** Collaboration with social researchers and academic experts on the topic at hand can help in getting the right research questions and proper survey design, thereby increasing credibility.
- **Establish a working group:** Overseeing the application of POD through collaborative management can foster transparency in the decision-making process.
- **Review evidence:** Undertake a preliminary review of the available evidence related to the issue at hand. This will help justify the collection of relevant variables and identify pre-existing, credible survey instruments that can be utilised or adapted for the current study.
- **Explore partnerships with credible stakeholders:** such as NGOs and research institutions, who can provide expert advice or may be better positioned to collect and analyse the data.
- **Develop a pre-analysis plan:** Provide a clear roadmap for how data will be analysed before it is collected to ensure that the analysis remains objective and consistent with the original intent. This approach is particularly valuable in confirmatory research. While less suited for exploratory research, clearly documenting your analytical approach can still bolster trust and credibility in your findings.
- **Consider longitudinal/repeated assessments:** Conducting repeated assessments to capture how public attitudes shift over time, can provide a more comprehensive and accurate picture of trends. This approach enhances the legitimacy of the data by demonstrating its robustness and depth, rather than appearing opportunistic.

Impact

- **Transparent dissemination:** Transparency in how POD, along with other evidence inputs, informs decision-making contributes to building public trust and prevents manipulation of the data for political purposes. This openness not only normalises its use as an integral part of the evidence base but also fosters more informed and constructive public conversations.
- **Discuss communication and risk mitigation strategies early:** Develop dissemination strategies to ensure that the translation of research and data is accessible and understandable to broader audiences, and well communicated to decision-makers. Discuss in advance potential misuses of the data and define strategies to mitigate these risks.



3. TRADE-OFFS BETWEEN METHODOLOGICAL RIGOUR, TIMELINES AND BUDGETS

What is it? The need to balance the timelines and budgets of commissioning bodies against the rigour of POD research often results in trade-offs that can compromise the soundness of the data and its effectiveness in informing decision making. For example, tight budgets may limit the scope of data collection and force reliance on less representative samples, directly affecting the accuracy and generalisability of the findings. This can also increase the risk of data misinterpretation or manipulation. Over time, compromises on data quality can erode the perceived usefulness of POD in policymaking, casting doubts on its reliability as a foundational evidence source. Ensuring the methodology is fit-for-purpose is key to maintaining the integrity and relevance of the findings.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Ensure that the survey's methodology is fit

for purpose: Gain an understanding of sampling methodologies, their trade-offs and limitations to evaluate the fit for purpose of the proposed methodology. Collaborating with statisticians and survey methodologists can significantly support this task. This evaluation should guide the decision on whether to proceed with the research or explore alternative approaches, such as adjusting the scope of the research or leveraging existing data sources.

Establish efficient feedback mechanisms: Implement continuous feedback mechanisms involving decision-makers to ensure that the insights derived from public opinion data remain relevant. Establish clear decision points throughout the project lifecycle where the feasibility and appropriateness of continuing the research can be reassessed based on evolving findings and resource availability.

Transparency on data limitations: Clearly report the data's limitations and caveats and ensure the implications are fully understood by decision-makers and the public. This contributes to ensuring that the data is not misinterpreted.



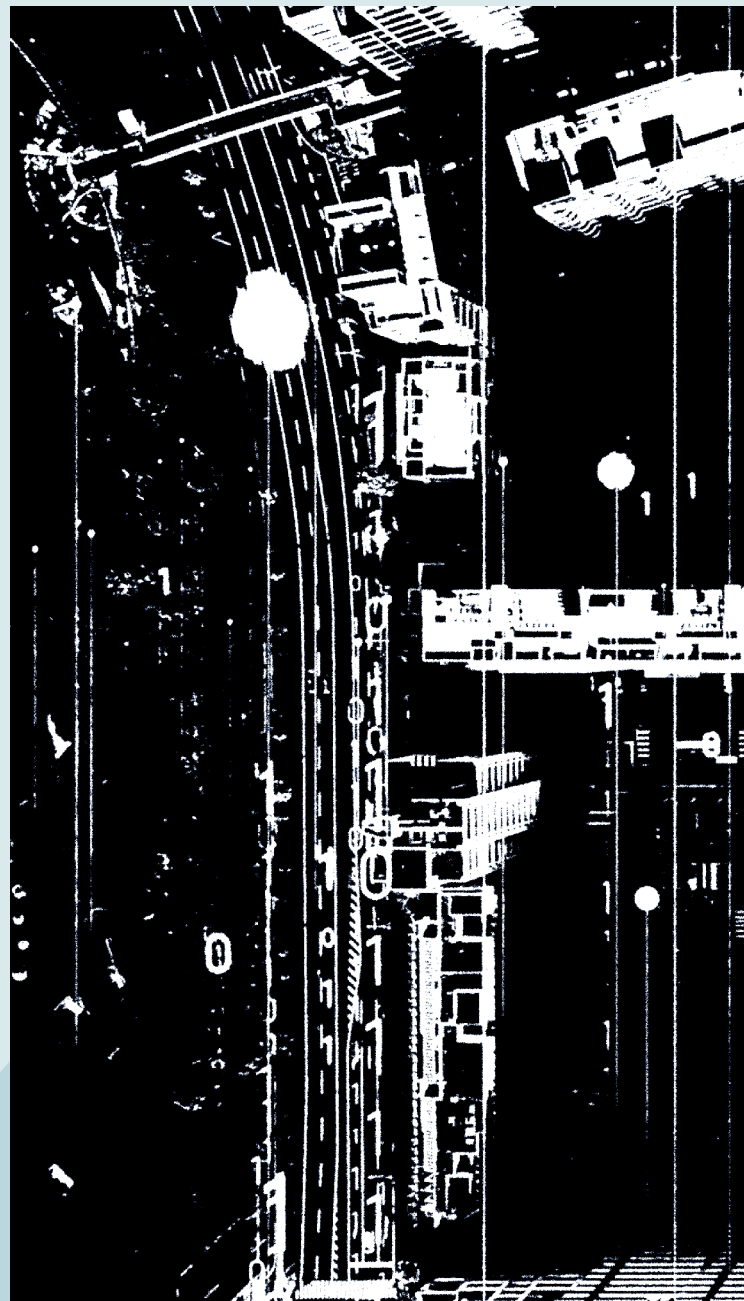
CONSIDERATIONS FOR CRISIS CONTEXTS: NAVIGATING EMERGENCIES, UNCERTAINTY AND FAST-PACED CHANGES

In emergencies characterised by uncertainty and rapid changes, implementing a methodical approach becomes increasingly challenging. From the considerations outlined above, several factors have been identified as critical during crisis contexts:

- **Adapt POD objectives:** Initially, POD may serve as an exploratory tool to comprehend the broader situation without a specific inquiry focus. However, this approach should gradually evolve into addressing targeted and focused knowledge gaps and information needs of decision-makers to render the insights actionable.
- **Collaborate with experts:** With limited time available for research and understanding the existing body of evidence, partnering with social researchers and academic experts can expedite the process without sacrificing the rigour and ethical approach of the POD's design, collection, and analysis. It is advisable to establish these partnerships during business-as-usual (BAU) periods to leverage them effectively during crises.
- **Consider longitudinal/repeated assessments:** In rapidly changing environments, repeated assessments are valuable for identifying trends or significant variations, thereby enabling more accurate and timely policy actions.
- **Seek efficient feedback mechanisms (formal or informal):** Flexible feedback mechanisms, both formal and informal, can help ensure that POD remains adaptive to rapid changes and responsive to immediate policy requirements.

FRAMEWORK FOR SAFEGUARDING AND EFFECTIVELY USING PUBLIC OPINION DATA FOR POLICYMAKING

The framework below presents a series of critical questions designed to guide public servants through the thoughtful application of POD in policymaking. The questions will help you assess the need, validity and potential impact of POD at every step, ensuring its integration into policy is both justified and beneficial.



PURPOSE

ARTICULATE THE PURPOSE AND VALUE OF PUBLIC OPINION DATA

1. What problem or knowledge gap is this data intended to address?
2. What insights are expected from POD that cannot be obtained from other sources?
3. Is quantifiable data necessary? (e.g., for making inferences from the general population or population of interest, correlations, or modelling)
4. What other evidence inputs will be considered for decision making?

UNDERSTAND THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

1. What are the political implications of POD findings?
2. How might POD results influence public perceptions and political outcomes?
3. What are the dominant narratives and interests on this issue, and how might they affect the use of POD findings?
4. How can we manage and respond to public disagreements or controversies that arise from POD findings?

DEFINE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Which stakeholders and experts need to be involved in order to ensure data insights are relevant and actionable?
2. What are the specific research questions that will guide the design, collection and analysis of the data?
3. Are the research objectives framed to specifically uncover the underlying drivers and barriers influencing behaviour and attitudes?
4. Is there a need or benefit for repeated data collection to track changes over time?

EXPLORE ALTERNATIVES

1. Can the required insights be obtained from existing data or estimated from other readily available sources? (e.g. administrative data)
2. What are the pros and cons of using other data sources in terms of timelines and costs?
3. Are there other credible stakeholders (e.g., NGOs, research institutions) currently collecting this data?
4. Would commissioning it to another organisation facilitate reaching out to vulnerable groups, or give more credibility to the findings?

PROCESS

FOSTER TRANSPARENCY IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC OPINION DATA

1. What mechanisms could be established to foster transparency on the decision making process for the use of POD?
2. What are the checkpoints for reviewing the effectiveness of the POD in informing policy?
3. How can collaboration with social researchers or academic experts enhance transparency in the design, collection, and analysis of POD?

APPROACH DESIGN, COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS WITH RIGOUR

1. Is the survey design aligned with the research objectives and adhering to ethical standards?
2. Is your survey-design backed-up with evidence? (e.g. literature review stating key drivers of an issue or credible pre-existing surveys)
3. What are the appropriate sampling methodologies to address the data collection objectives? Are these feasible given time and budget considerations?
4. Considering the trade-offs and limitations of the methodology, can it reliably deliver the insights required to fulfil the research objectives?
5. Does the analysis plan effectively align with the stated research objectives and adequately address the key questions?
6. Is the team responsible for managing POD recognised for their credibility, reputation and skills?
7. Is the team supported by people with the relevant skills? (e.g. statistician, data analyst, subject-matter expert, social researcher, etc.)

IMPACT

DEVELOP COMMUNICATION AND RISK MITIGATION STRATEGIES

1. What are the potential risks of POD findings?
2. How can these risks be mitigated?
3. How will the findings be communicated to decision-makers?
4. What strategies will be used to ensure the data's implications and limitations are clearly understood and disclosed?
5. How will the findings be communicated to the public? What are the risks and benefits of doing so?

ASSESS THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION DATA

1. Are data insights being understood and used in policy discussions? (uptake)
2. What value is it providing against other inputs? (fit for purpose)
3. To what extent is POD informing decision making? (influence)
4. How has POD, in conjunction with other inputs, contributed to specific outcomes such as the development of policies, programs, or communication strategies? (impact)
5. What lessons have been learned from using POD, and what improvements could be made to enhance its effectiveness in the future?

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