

Policy Formulation: The Cycle of Decision Making

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Prof. Vassallo opened the conference with a conceptual session by addressing a semantic ambiguity that often clouds local discourse. He noted that the Maltese word *politika* encompasses two distinct English concepts: *politics* and *policy*.

- **Politics** refers to ideological power relations, the struggle for authority, and the partisan manoeuvring that characterises election cycles.
- **Policy** refers to the structured direction, principles, and administrative decisions that guide governmental action to solve societal problems.

Vassallo argued that understanding this distinction is vital because while politics often captures the headlines, it is policy that directly shapes the daily lives of citizens. In the context of language, policy determines whether a grandmother can understand her hospital discharge letter, or whether a migrant worker can access justice.

He outlined public policy not as a singular event, but as a multi-stage, cyclical process. While theoretically linear, in practice, these stages overlap and are subject to a "dense web of influences," including public opinion, NGO pressure, business lobbies, and supranational obligations like EU directives.

The cycle includes five distinct phases:

1. **Problem Identification:** The process begins when an issue is recognised by politicians, technocrats, or civil society. For language policy, this might be the realisation that digital literacy in Maltese is falling behind. The government must determine if intervention is necessary based on evidence rather than perception.
2. **Formulation of Alternatives:** Once a problem is defined, ministries use analytical tools like impact assessments and cost-benefit analyses to generate solutions. Vassallo emphasised that the "best" solution is not always the cheapest. For example, translating all government websites

is expensive, but the "cost" of not doing so is the social exclusion of Maltese-dominant speakers.

- 3. Decision-Making:** This is the political pivot point. Elected officials, who hold the democratic mandate, must select a preferred option. This stage involves balancing competing social and economic interests (e.g., the efficiency of English vs. the cultural right to Maltese) to serve the national interest.
- 4. Implementation:** Policy is only as good as its execution. This requires professional project management, inter-institutional coordination, and contingency planning. In language planning, this often fails due to a lack of resources; statutes are passed, but no inspectors are hired.
- 5. Evaluation:** An evidence-based review is essential to determine if the policy should be continued, revised, or abandoned.

Conclusion

Vassallo posited that Malta possesses the necessary expertise (academic linguists) and institutions (The University, The Council, L-Akkademja and NGOs). However, progress on language policy is slow due to two missing elements: the elevation of the issue on the national agenda (it is rarely a "vote-winner") and the securing of genuine political will to enforce standards that might inconvenience the private sector or public administration.