



Agenda Setting & Public Policy Stages

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An exploration of how governments decide which problems deserve priority attention — and the forces, actors, and evidence that shape those decisions.

What Is Agenda Setting?

Core Definition

Agenda setting is the process by which governments select which problems are considered important enough to be addressed as a priority. In simple terms: out of the many problems in society, the government must choose which ones to tackle first.

Not every social problem automatically becomes a policy priority. The process of "getting on the agenda" is itself a political and social contest.

Key Social Problems in Indonesia (2025)

Poverty

Poverty rate: **8.47%** — approximately **23.85 million** people still living below the poverty line. Remains the central challenge of national development.

Unemployment

Unemployment rate: **4.76%** — approximately **7.28 million** people unemployed. A classic issue that consistently enters the government's agenda.

Sub-Optimal Economic Growth

Economic growth: **4.87%** (Q1 2025). The economy is growing, but not fast enough to absorb all available labor.

- 📌 **Discussion Prompt:** If you were the government, which of these problems would you address first and what policy would be most appropriate?

Who Sets the Agenda?

The policy agenda is not determined by the government alone. It is the result of a **"tug of war of interests"** among multiple actors in society.



Government

President, Parliament (DPR), and ministries hold formal authority to place issues on the official agenda and allocate resources.



Media

News framing and coverage intensity can elevate or suppress public awareness of an issue, directly influencing political salience.



Public Opinion

Widespread public concern — especially when amplified through social media — creates pressure that is difficult for governments to ignore.



Academics

Researchers and policy experts provide evidence, analysis, and recommendations that can legitimize or challenge policy priorities.



Interest Groups

Business associations, NGOs, and civil society organizations lobby actively to ensure their concerns are reflected in the policy agenda.

Real Example: Fuel Price Hike (BBM)

Driven by a combination of public pressure, DPR deliberation, and sustained media coverage, illustrating multi-actor agenda dynamics.

Real Example: Law Revisions

Often pushed by political elites, demonstrating that agenda setting can be top-down rather than bottom-up.

The Role of Media & Virality

How does an issue "rise" to become a policy agenda item? In the modern information environment, media framing and viral social media content play a decisive role in shaping what governments feel compelled to act on.

Key Mechanisms

→ Viral Social Media

Issues that spread rapidly online generate mass public awareness in a short time, creating immediate political pressure.

→ News Framing

How media frames a story — as a crisis, injustice, or systemic failure — determines whether it is perceived as requiring urgent government response.

→ Public Opinion Formation

Sustained coverage shapes public opinion, which in turn signals to policymakers that an issue carries electoral and social weight.

Real-World Examples in Indonesia

Violence Cases Going Viral

Cases of violence that spread on social media have repeatedly prompted immediate government attention and policy responses — demonstrating the direct link between virality and agenda entry.

Education Costs (UKT)

The issue of expensive university tuition fees (UKT) gained massive online traction, leading to formal parliamentary discussion — a textbook case of bottom-up agenda setting.

Why Do Important Problems Get Left Off the Agenda?

Not all serious social problems make it onto the policy agenda. Understanding why important issues are ignored is as critical as understanding how issues gain attention.



"Hidden" Problems

Some problems are structurally invisible — they affect marginalized populations with little political voice, occur gradually rather than dramatically, or lack compelling visual narratives that attract media attention.



Politically Unprofitable

Issues that do not generate electoral benefit, or that threaten powerful interest groups, are often deliberately kept off the agenda by political actors who control agenda-setting mechanisms.



Lack of Public Pressure

Without organized civil society, media coverage, or vocal advocacy, even objectively serious problems may fail to generate the political urgency needed to enter the formal policy agenda.

The Role of Data & Research: Evidence-Based Policy

What Is Evidence-Based Policy?

Good policy should be grounded in empirical data and rigorous research rather than political intuition or short-term electoral calculations. Key sources of evidence include:



BPS Data (Statistics Indonesia)

Official national statistics on poverty, unemployment, economic growth, and demographics provide the empirical baseline for policy design.



Academic Research

Peer-reviewed studies and university research provide causal analysis and policy evaluation that can guide more effective interventions.



Policy Briefs

Concise, actionable documents produced by think tanks and research institutions translate complex findings into recommendations for decision-makers.

The Gap Between Ideal and Reality

While evidence-based policy is the gold standard, the reality of policymaking is often more complex. Political pressures, time constraints, vested interests, and limited institutional capacity mean that data and research are not always the primary drivers of policy decisions.

The challenge for good governance is to **narrow the gap** between what the evidence recommends and what political processes actually produce — making research more accessible, credible, and politically relevant.

Key Insight: Good policy should be data-driven, but in practice, this is not always the case. Recognizing this gap is the first step toward improving policy quality.

Case Study: COVID-19 in Indonesia

The COVID-19 pandemic provides one of the most dramatic and instructive examples of agenda setting in modern Indonesian history — illustrating how a crisis can instantly reshape national policy priorities.



COVID-19: Agenda Setting in Action

How COVID-19 Entered the Agenda



Factors That Accelerated Agenda Entry

Major Crisis

A declared public health emergency created irresistible pressure for immediate government response.

Continuous Media Coverage

24/7 news coverage kept the issue at the forefront of public consciousness and political attention.

Global Pressure

Pressure from WHO and international partners made inaction politically untenable for the Indonesian government.

Widespread Public Fear

Broad societal anxiety created a strong bottom-up demand for decisive government intervention.

COVID-19: Policy Responses & Key Lessons

Policies Implemented by the Indonesian Government

→ Activity Restrictions

Large-scale social restrictions (PSBB) and mobility limitations were imposed to slow transmission.

→ School & Office Closures

Educational institutions and workplaces were closed, with Work From Home (WFH) mandated for non-essential sectors.

→ Closure of Public Spaces

Public venues, entertainment centers, and gathering places were shut down to enforce physical distancing.

→ Free Vaccination Program

The government launched a nationwide free vaccination campaign — one of the largest in Indonesian history.

→ Cash Assistance (Bantuan Tunai)

Direct cash transfers were provided to vulnerable households to cushion the economic impact of restrictions.

Four Key Lessons from This Case

1 Agenda Setting Can Be Extremely Rapid During a Crisis

In emergency conditions, the normal slow pace of agenda setting is compressed, decisions that might take years happen in days.

2 Media & Global Actors Are Highly Influential

International organizations and continuous media coverage were decisive in shaping both public perception and government response.

3 One Problem Can Generate Many Policies

A single agenda item, COVID-19, produced a cascade of policies spanning health, education, labor, and social welfare.

4 Priorities Can Shift Over Time

As the acute health crisis stabilized, the policy focus shifted from health management to economic recovery — demonstrating that agendas are dynamic, not static.