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## **Public Policy Process: The System of Actions**

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### **Abstract**

Public Policy is a formal documented statement of intentions and sets of actions of a government to either remove certain deficiencies or improve the conditions in any particular area of concern/interest. It is “whatever governments choose to do or not to do” and it is a system of laws, regulatory measures, courses of actions and funding priorities concerning a given topic promulgated by a governmental entity or its representatives. Public policy is very crucial to public sector managers because public policy is one subject that affects the lives and wellbeing of the people and the knowledge of it will adequately equip the public sector managers with clearer understanding of the reasons for some, if not all of governments thought process and its actions or inactions. This will help public sector managers to proffer intelligent advice to the government. From the literature, there are three reasons for studying public policy. They include; a) professional reasons, b) scientific reasons and c) political reasons. The analyses of the nature, basic elements and scopes as well as types of public policies in this unit have elucidated more on public policy analysis. The effort was geared to make you a good public policy analyst. There are still other types of public policy like reversible and irreversible policies, explicit and implicit policies, material and symbolic policies as well as collective good-private good policies.

**Keywords:** Public Policy, Public Problem, Policy Formulation, Policy Legitimation, Policy Implementation, Policy Evaluation

### **Introduction**

Public policy is a purposive course of actions or inactions undertaken by an actor or set of actors in dealing with particular problem or matter of concern (Anderson, 2005). Public policy is a proposed course of action of a person, group or government within environment providing opportunities and obstacles which the policy proposed utilizes and overcomes in an effort to reach a goal or realize an objective or propose (Carl J. Friedrich). To Thomas R. Dye, Public policy is whatever government chooses to do or not to do. Thus, Public Policy is a course of government action or inaction in response to public problems. It is associated with formally approved policy goals and means, as well as the regulations and practices that implement programs. Dimock, et.al. (2013:40) sees public policy as “deciding at any time or place what objectives and substantive measures should be chosen in order to deal with a particular problem”. Chandler and Plano (2008) define policy as “the strategies used to use resources to alleviate national problems or governmental concerns”. Freeman and Sherwood (2008) posit that it is the public response to the interest in improving the human conditions. In these definitions there is divergence between what governments decide to do and what they actually do. Public

policy is a guide which government has designed for direction and practice in certain problem areas.

Public policy is an important instrument of governance, public policy affects each and every aspect of our life. Therefore, an understanding of the processes by which public policy is actually made and the institutions and actors that play a role in this process is vital for informed citizens and for all of us interested in improving the quality of government or promoting 'good governance'. It's not only offers useful insights into 'why' and 'how' policies are formulated and implemented, and 'succeed' or 'fail', but also offers strategic choices and options necessary for coalition/support building for appropriate and effective policy formulation and implementation. This may ultimately lead to ensuring good governance.

Public policy making is not merely a technical function of government; rather it is a complex interactive process influenced by the diverse nature of socio-political and other environmental forces. These environmental forces that form the policy context lead to the variation in policies and influence the output and impact. Due to the contextual differences, public policies of the developed countries significantly differ from those of the developing countries. Although the policies of developed countries have proved their effectiveness in many cases, those cannot be applied in understanding the dynamics of the policy process of developing countries. Public policies in the developing countries possess certain peculiarities of their own by virtue of being influenced by an unstable socio-political environment, and face various problems and challenges. Poverty, malnutrition, ill health, illiteracy, low standards of living, unemployment and other common phenomena of these countries have also been creating a growing pessimism about the effectiveness of public policies. Given this situation, in developing country, policy studies deserve urgent attention. The existing theories of policy making provide useful guidance for analyzing policies of developing countries but they are not quite sufficient for undertaking a comprehensive analysis. This is because most of the policy making theories are derived from the studies of industrially developed societies, which in most cases, are found insufficient to explain the policies of developing countries due to the contextual variations.

## **Public Policy Process**

### **a. Public Problem Identification:**

Defining a public problem is a plausible way of commencing a discourse on public policy Analysis. This is because, in the words of John Dewey, "a problem well defined is a problem half solved". Again, the famous Albert Einstein asserted "if I had an hour to solve a problem would spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and 5 minutes thinking about solutions. Therefore, in public policy analysis, the key question is to find out what the policy problem is. Defining a policy problem is an act of conceptualizing collective problems or challenges to be dealt with. It involves mobilizing other in specific ways to look at problems and solutions (Hanberger, 1997). A policy problem definition has three main components: description of influential conditions and interests, history of prior governmental action or inaction, and persuasive argument, bearing in mind that a public problem is a condition that at least some people in a society view as being undesirable.

Policy-making presuppose the recognition of policy problem. Problem recognition itself requires that a social problems has been defined as such and that the necessity of state intervention has been expressed. The second step would be that the recognized problem is actually put on the agenda is nothing more than “the list of subjects or problems to which governmental officials, and people outside the government closely associated with those officials, are paying some serious attention at any given time”(Kingdon, 2005). The government’s (or institutional) agenda has been distinguished from the wider media and the overall public (or systemic) agenda (Cobb and elder 2012). While the government’s (formal and informal) agenda presents the center of attention of studies on agenda-setting, the means and mechanisms of problem recognition and issue selection are tightly connected with the ways a social problem is recognized and perceived on the public/media agenda.

As numerous studies since the 1960s have shown problem recognition and agenda-setting are inherently political processes in which political attention is attached to a subset of all possibly relevant policy problems. Actors within and outside government constantly seek to influence and collectively shape the agenda (e.g., by taking advantage of rising attention to a particular issue, dramatizing a problem, or advancing a particular problem definition). The involvement of particular actors (e.g. Experts), the choice of institutional venues in which problems are debated and the strategic use of media coverage have been identified as tactical means to defined issues (Kingdon2005; Baumgartner and Jones 2013). While a number of actors are involved in these activities of agenda control or shaping, most of the variables and mechanisms affecting agenda setting lie outside the direct control of any single actor.

## **b. Public Policy Formulation**

During this stage of the policy cycle, expressed problems, proposals, and demands are transformed into government programs. Policy formulation and adoption includes the definition of objectives what should be achieved with the policy and the consideration of different action alternatives. Some authors differentiate between formulation (of alternatives for action) and the final adoption (the formal decision to take on the policy). Because policies will not always be formalized into separate programs and a clear-cut separation between formulation and decision making is very often impossible, we treat them as sub stages in a single stage of the policy cycle. In trying to account for different styles, patterns, and outcomes of policy formulation and decision-making, studies on this stage of the cycle framework have been particularly theory oriented.

Over the last two decades or so, a fruitful connection with organizational decision theories has evolved (see Olsen 2011). A multiplicity of approaches and explanations has been utilized, ranging from pluralistic and corporatist interest intermediation to perspectives of incrementalism and the garbage can approach. Others are public choice approaches and the widely utilized neo-institutionalist perspectives (both in its economical and historical institutionalist variant; for an overview see Parsons 2005, 134).

At the same time, studies of policy formulation have long been strongly influenced by efforts to improve practices within governments by introducing techniques and tools of more rational decision making. This became most evident during the heyday of political planning and reform policy in the 1960s and 1970s. Policy analysis was part of a reform coalition engaged indeveloping tools and methods for identifying effective and cost-efficient policies (Wittrock, Wagner, and Wollmann2011, Wollmann2014). Western governments were strongly receptive to these ideas given the widespread confidence in

the necessity and feasibility of long-term planning. Pioneered by attempts of the U.S. government to introduce Planning Programming Budgeting Systems (PPBS), European governments engaged in similar efforts of long-term planning.

Especially political scientists argued from the beginning (Lindblom2008; Wildavsky2009) that decision-making comprises not only information gathering and processing (analysis), but foremost consists of conflict resolution within and between public and private actors and government departments (interaction). In terms of patterns of interdepartmental interaction, Mayntz and Scharpf (2015) argued that these usually follow the type of negative coordination (based on sequential participation of different departments after the initial policy program has been drafted) rather than ambitious and complex attempts of positive coordination (pooling suggested policy solutions as part of the drafting), thus leading to the typical process of reactive policy-making. The aim of political science based policy analysis was, therefore, to suggest institutional arrangements which would support more active policy-making.

While these (earlier) studies pointed to the crucial role of the ministerial bureaucracy and top civil servants in policy formulation (Dogan2015; Hecló and Wildavsky2014), governments and higher civil servants are not strictly separated from the wider society when formulating policies; instead, they are constantly interacting with social actors and form rather stable patterns of relationships (policy networks). Whereas the final decision on a specific policy remains in the realm of the responsible institutions (mainly cabinet, ministers, Parliament), this decision is preceded by a more or less informal process of negotiated policy formation, with ministerial departments (and the units within the departments), organized interest groups and, depending on the political system, elected members of parliaments and their associates as major players. Numerous policy studies have convincingly argued that the processes in the preliminary stages of decision-making strongly influence the final outcome and very often shape the policy to a larger extent than the final processes within the parliamentary arena (Kenis and Schneider2011). Moreover, these studies made a strong case against the rational model of decision making. Instead of a rational selection among alternative policies, decision-making results from bargaining between diverse actors within a policy subsystem, the result being determined by the constellation and power resources of (substantial and institutional) interest of the involved actors and processes of partisan mutual adjustment. Incrementalism, thus, forms the typical style (Lindblom 1959, 2009) of this kind of policy formation, especially in allocation of budgets (Wildavsky 1964, 2008).

While patterns of interaction between governments and society in policy networks are regarded as an omnipresent phenomenon, the particular constellation of actors within policy networks vary between policy domains, as well as between nation states with different political/administrative cultures, traditions of law (cf. Feick and Jann2008) and differences regarding the wider constitutional setting. As the historical-institutional approach in policy research has pointed out, countries have developed particular types of policy networks resulting from the interaction of the pre-existing state structure and the organization of society at critical junctures in history (Lehmbruch2011). These differences are said to foster national styles of policy-making in terms of preferred policy instruments and patterns of interaction between state and society (Richardson, Gustafsson, and Jordan 2012; Feick and Jann2008). It remains, however, a debated issue in comparative policy research if policy networks are to a larger degree shaped by the (different) basic national institutional patterns or if the policies within specific policy subsystems are, to a larger extent, shaped by sectoral, domain-specific governance structures (with the implication of more variety between sectors within one country than

between countries regarding one sector) (see e.g., Bovens, t'Hart, and Peters 2001). Some have argued that the emphasis on the pervasive nature of policy networks obscured national variations of patterns of policy-making that are in fact related to (different) underlying institutional arrangements and state architectures (Döhler and Manow 2005).

When policy formulation is defined as the development of effective and acceptable courses of action for addressing what has been placed on the policy agenda, two parts to this definition are discerned:

**1. Effective formulation** means that the policy proposed is regarded as a valid, efficient, and implementable solution to the issue at hand. If the policy is seen as ineffective or unworkable in practice, there is no legitimate reason to propose it. Policy analysts try to identify effective alternatives. This is the analytical phase of policy formulation.

**2. Acceptable formulation** means that the proposed course of action is likely to be authorized by the legitimate decision makers, usually through majority building in a bargaining process. That is, it must be politically feasible. If the policy is likely to be rejected by the decision making body, it may be impractical to suggest it. This is the political phase of policy formulation. These two parts to the definition call to mind those who are involved in policy formulation. A mere mention of government agencies, presidential organizations, legislators, interest groups etc.

**3. Public Policy Legitimation**

“Legitimacy” means that the public considers the government’s actions to be legal and authoritative. To gain legitimacy in the United States, a policy must be moved through the legislative process. Once this happens, it is considered the law of the land and can be implemented as such. It must be mentioned that the legitimacy of a policy is only as good as the willingness of citizens to accept it. Therefore, it is possible for people to reject policy if they view the policy makers’ behavior or the legislation itself as unacceptable in some way.

**4. Public Policy Implementation**

Policy implementation is the process of translating policy mandates into action, prescription into results and goals into reality. It refers to the processes and reality. It refers to the processes and activities involved in the application, effectuation and administering of a policy. It is the actions taken to carryout, accomplish and fulfill the intents, objectives and expected outcomes of public policies. It is the act and process of converting a policy into reality and of enforcing a policy

(Pressman & Wildavsky, 2009). Meanwhile, the implementation process consists of the implementing organization, the environment particularly the political and economic environment, the policy target group, the objectives and the enunciated method of implementation and policy resources. The carrying out of policy or its implementation is usually done by other institutions than those that were responsible for its formulation and adoption. Many problems are technically so complex and difficult that the legislature does not try to deal with them in detail. The legislature thus indicates the broad lines of policy, and leaves the elaboration of the policy to other governmental agencies. The complexity of the policy, coordination between the agencies putting it into effect and compliance, determine how successfully the policy is implemented.

The decision on a specific course of action and the adoption of a program does not guarantee that the action on the ground will strictly follow policy makers’ aims and objectives. The stage of execution or enforcement of a policy by the responsible institutions and organizations that are often, but not always, part of the public sector, is

referred to as implementation. Policy implementation is broadly defined as ‘what happens between the establishment of an apparent intention on the part of the government to do something, or to stop doing something, and the ultimate impact in the world of action’ (O’Toole 2000, 266). This stage is critical as political and administrative action at the frontline are hardly ever perfectly controllable by objectives, programs, laws, and the like (Hogwood and Gurm2014). Therefore, policies and their intentions will very often be changed or even distorted; its execution delayed or even blocked altogether.

### **c. Policy Implementation by Government Agencies**

#### **i. Executive**

Modern governments everywhere rely on executive leadership both in policy formation and policy implementation. In the United Kingdom with parliamentary system operating cabinet government, the governments in most cases rely on their back-benchers to provide them with the majorities necessary to conduct government business. In Nigeria, where presidential system of government is in vogue the federal executive councils and state executive councils cabinets are the central organs of public policy formulation and implementation. The executive arm of government has a legal authority in public policy formulation. It is one the official Actors. The executive councils collectively reach decisions on various policy matters placed before them at cabinet meetings. For example, various policy initiatives emanate from ministries, departments and agencies of government.

#### **ii. Legislature**

The legislature, comprising the national assembly, state house of assembly and local government council assemblies in Nigeria, also play a notable role in policy-making. Under democracy implementation of most policies can only commence when the appropriate legislation has been put in place and money appropriated in the budget for the programmes and initiatives requiring legislation, such as those on anti-corruption, privatization and trade union” Act etc., go through the assemblies. These assemblies wield a lot of power as policy proposals submitted by the executive are subjected to substantial amendments in the assembly. The national assembly performs oversight function of largely done through select committee, which has the power servant’s ministers of their ministries. The public accounts committee in the national assembly monitors public expenditures of various ministries and agencies.

#### **iii. Experts/Technocrats in Administrative Agencies**

Top Administrators play major role in policy implementation. Policy is laid down by the legislature or the political authorities, who are vested with the power of giving policy the legal authority. The legislature lays down a policy in general terms which is usually expressed in the form of acts and laws. In order to give more precise expression to these acts and laws, the administrative arm of the government plays an important role in policy-making also. But, in the main, the administrative arm does not legally possess the power of making a policy; it assists in policy making. Its responsibility lies in the sphere of policy implementation. In summary, experts and technocrats in administrative agencies play roles in policy formation process. They supply information and help to articulate (at booth the macro and micro levels, on the hand, and at the objective and subjective levels, on the other) the broad objectives that guide policy directions as a totality of management. The advice of experts can also lead to the initiation of policies by decision-makers or

politicians, apart from the vision of the government itself in addition, experts assist with the scientific management of the policy process through policy formulation and analysis.

**iv. Law Courts**

In countries where the courts have the power of judicial review like Nigeria and United States of America, courts play an important role in policy formation. The courts have often greatly affected the nature and content of public policy through exercise of the powers of judicial review and statutory interpretation in cases brought before them. In any political system, the courts or judiciary participate in policy making process indirectly. Courts are approached to interpret and decide the meaning of legislative provisions that often generally stated and permit conflicting interpretations. Any judge confronted with a choice between two or more interpretations and applications of a legislative act, executive order or constitutional provision must choose from among them because the decision has to be given or the controversy must be ended. And when the judge does so, his or her interpretation becomes policy for the specific litigants. When a court accepts one interpretation or a decision is accepted by other courts, the court has made a policy for all jurisdictions in which that view prevail.

**d. Policy Implementation by Non-Governmental Agencies**

**i. Interest Groups**

While the executive (cabinet ministries, agencies/ parastatals) plays the central role in policy making, the need for consensus building in the process dictates that various interest groups be carried along these groups contribute inputs in various ways into the policy-making process and use covert and overt pressures to influence directly or indirectly the policies of government at any particular point in time. Through various channels, they contribute inputs into the debates and discussions that go on before a particular issue is crystallized as policy decision of government. For example, deregulation of petroleum product policies. Various interest groups, such as labour various, media, private sectors! Professional bodies, non-governmental organizational and civil society organizations were given the opportunity to contribute towards shaping the desired policy.

**e. Policy Implementation by the Public**

**i. Individual Citizens**

Since democratic governments are representative governments, it is often said that citizens are, therefore, indirectly represented in all policy making. In an abstract sense, this is true, but concretely, this aphorism means very little. Citizen's participation in policy making, even in democratic countries, is very negligible. Many people do not exercise their franchise or engage in party politics. They neither join pressure groups nor display any active interest in public affairs. Even, while voting, voters are influenced comparatively little by policy considerations. However, despite such political attitudes of great majority of citizens, some still participate directly in decision making through demands to government.

**ii. Influence of Media**

A prerequisite of democracy is free media of communication. The media channel information between the citizen and government. They communicate the information to the citizen's about the decisions the governments have taken. In this way, the media help shape their reactions to each other's decisions. By publicizing specific causes, the media

act as the most important source of information for the government on the public's reactions to contemporary issues. However, if the citizen is to make rational decisions about public policy, the media should be of a high standard of reliability. They should be seen as biased against government of the day, but offer constructive criticisms when necessary. The media can influence public opinions especially where the government is responsive and responsible to the public. It is only then they can be influential in determining policy.

**f. Public Policy Monitoring/Evaluation/Appraisal**

**i. Internal Mechanism**

**The Office of the President (OP):**

- a. Conducts monitoring of key Government program to generate policy advice for Cabinet and the President;
- b. Tracks the implementation of Cabinet decisions;
- c. Reports on policies and results through the annual State of the Nation Address.

**The Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MFPED):**

- a. Coordinates the preparation and presentation of the national budget
- b. Ensures the rationale financing of statistics, monitoring and evaluation functions in Government through establishing a Vote Function Output for all MDAs and LGs in the Chart of Accounts, with budget ceilings set to this Output in line with this Policy;
- c. Ensures that sufficient resources are allocated annually through the national budget to the statistics, monitoring and evaluation functions of Government in line with this Policy
- d. Monitors budget execution and progress on MoUs commitments to promote efficiency and effectiveness of all public spending;
- e. Ensures that all public investment projects approved by the Development Committee have a clear monitoring and evaluation plan, and sufficient resources for conducting monitoring and evaluation activities;
- f. Releases timely and quality information on budget execution.

**The National Planning Authority (NPA):**

- a. Prepares a long term vision, and results-orientated comprehensive and integrated medium and long-term development plans for the country
- b. Works with MFPED in the preparation of the annual budget, medium and long-term expenditure frameworks to implement the national development plans
- c. Coordinates and harmonizes development planning in the country
- d. Supports local capacity development for national planning, and in particular, provide support and guidance to the national and local bodies responsible for the decentralized planning process.
- e. Studies and publishes independent assessments of key economic and social policy issues and options so as to increase public understanding and participation in the economic and social policy debate
- f. Contributes to the preparation of the Government's Annual Performance Report with data and evidence on progress towards national development plan objectives



- g. Monitors the performance of the decentralized system of development planning and financing, and proposes such institutional innovations that may be required for its improved operation
- h. Advises the President on policies and strategies for the development of Nigeria
- i. Monitors and evaluates the effectiveness and impact of development program and the performance of the economy
- j. Liaises with the private sector and civil society in the evaluation of Government performance and identifying filling gaps in Government policies and program.
- k. Conducts in-depth evaluations of the impact and cost of selected development program.

### **Participation and Consultation**

As the need for transparency increases, analysts will need to participate in ministerial and public meetings on policy issues, understand the concerns and interests of stakeholders and reflect these concerns in the final product. Preparing Reports, Briefings Analysts are required to prepare reports to senior officials, ministers, and the Cabinet on issues of broad national concern. In addition, the policy process may require oral briefings on technical issues to senior management or the minister.

### **The role of Global Agencies**

‘The United Nations (UN) system and its specialized international agencies have a pre-eminent role and responsibility to steer the political process to reach international consensus on global public policies and norms. But as illustrated by the ongoing multilateral trade or climate change negotiations, such exercises are complex and often take many years before a comprehensive agreement is reached. In the meantime, a ‘wait-and-see’ approach would be disastrous, weakening dramatically the credibility and impact of the international efforts to reduce world poverty and to promote sustainable development.

**The World Bank** decided, in 2007, to integrate selected global public good concerns into all aspects of its work. The Bank’s country teams were expected to integrate this new dimension into the Bank’s country strategies and operations, in close dialogue with the partner countries.

Moreover, the Bank was to expand its strategic participation into global programmes, to explore new financing modalities, to promote informed and constructive debate on global issues, and to increase its support to the delivery of regional public goods (World Bank, 2007). Most bilateral aid agencies have embarked on similar undertakings. The OECD has recently confirmed a significant move by many bilateral aid agencies towards addressing global issues in their strategy and policy formulation, as part of a renewed effort to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); multilateral partnerships seem also to benefit from a renewed interest, most prominently by the US in their new development agenda emphasizing multilateralism (OECD/DCD, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

The study of Public Policy Analysis is necessary to all public and private citizens’ for better understanding of government decision and programmes. Better knowledge of

public policies is enhanced by better knowledge of basic concepts in Public Policy such as Public Problem, Public Interest, Public Policy and Public Policy Analysis. Public policy is the cornerstone of every democracy and serves a very important purpose in almost every society. In Nigeria, we hear public policy quite often, but do we ever stop to think what good public policy is and what is not? Poverty alleviation, rural development, energy, housing and healthcare are some major public policy issues in our clime today and are the focus of most national lawmakers. There are many laws that positively benefit our society, and there are many that do not. What we can be sure about is that successful public policy is usually made up of two things: Good policy (measurable and positive outcome) and good politics (bipartisanship). Good public policy solves public problems effectively and efficiently, serves justice, supports democratic institutions and processes, and encourages an active and empathic citizenship. Consequently, African countries will remain underdeveloped until clear, well articulated policies with the appropriate institutional structures are put in place to enable them make the quantum leap needed to bridge the gap between them and the technologically advanced nations of the world in terms of public policy formulations.

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