

A Theoretical Review of Core Issues on Public Policy and its Environment

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ABSTRACT The centrality of public policy to human governance has been theoretically examined in this paper. In doing this, its core issues that have long attracted the attentions of scholars and practitioners all over the world were analytically perused giving relevance to the strength, weaknesses, opportunities and threats operating within the environmental space that usually surrounds the policy process, and its executors.

Consequent on this, the indispensability of the environment and its multidimensional forces to a problem-free public policy process are identified giving recognition to their futuristic implications.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of public policy and its environment is central to the process of governance particularly in the area of interractional affinity between the 'ruler' and the 'ruled'. Hence, it has attracted, though amidst disputations, the intellectual and practical attentions of scholars and practitioners within the scholarship or world of public administration, political science and other policy sciences.

Consequent on the foregoing, there has been a tremendous maturation of multidimensional interests in public policy and its environment over the years. In the process, the multifocal consequences of policy contents and their impacts on the environment, the policy makers and society at large has been variously analyzed within various polities of the global political community.

Given this premise, this paper theoretically reviews the core issues involved in the public policy as well as its delicacies for the environment and the latter's slippery terrains for same. And, in pursuit of its goal, in this regard, this paper is divided into four parts starting with the introduction.

The second part concretely examines the concept of public policy and its subject matter giving deserved recognition to the various schools of thought that have contributed to the intellectual and practical eclecticism of the concept within the international political systems. In this part, reasons for policy formulation, public policy hierarchy, its evaluation and criteria for same as well as the processes involved are

discussed.

The third part discussed the environment of public policy, its various dimensions and linkage with the policy process. And, the fourth part concludes the paper with requisite comments on the indispensability of ecology to effective and efficient policy outputs.

Concepts of Public Policy and Its Subject Matter

The term public policy has not been amenable to any easy definition. It is a concept that has long fallen a victim of definitional pluralism. Consequent on this, various scholars using different analytical frameworks have defined or attempted the definition of the subject matter of (public) policy. The tendency or development in our view has led to various contestation on the concept in question in terms of political discourse, thinking and practical application.

Sharkansky (1978) commenced this analytical consideration of the subject-matter of (public) policy on the premise that the term "public policy is ambiguous". According to him, "policy can refer to a proposal, an on-going programme, the goals of a programme, major decisions, or refusal to make certain decisions" (Ibid). He further argued that:

It would be misleading to specify one definition of policy (at any particular time)... but, the context in which the term is used should indicate the intended meaning (Ibid).

Based on the foregoing he defined public policies as:

the goals and actions of administrators under

taken in an effort to shape the quantity or quality of public service (Ibid).

In the same vein, Siegel and Weinberg (1977) once argued that:

public policies are shaped (or made) when government or comparable authorities decide whether or not to alter aspects of community life (Ibid).

They further argued that “polities are public to the extent that they involve governmental or quasi-governmental decision making and determine the interest of the community” (Ibid). And, that whenever we dwell on public policies, we focus on governmental actions and the consequences that flow from them” (Ibid).

Contributing to the explanatory efforts on the subject-matter of public policy, Eyestone (1977) broadly defined public policy “as the relationship of a government unit to its environment, a position that tallies with that of Anderson (1975) in his system analysis to demands arising from its environment”. while Dye (1972) defined public policy as “whatever government choose to do or not to do”, to Richard Rose (1969) public policy is “a long series of more or less related activities.”

In a similar position, Carl Friedrich (1963) had earlier defined public policy as:

a proposed course of action of a person, group or government within a given environment providing obstacles and opportunities which the policy was proposed to utilise and overcome in an effort to reach a goal or realise an objective or a purpose.

The inadequacies of some of these definitions could be identified if viewed within the parameters of the definition of public policy once given by James Anderson (op cit) as:

a purposive course of action followed by an actor or a set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern.

He has additionally examined the concept of public policy through various theoretical perspectives. These ranged from the perspective of political system theory, group theory, elite theory, functional process theory, institutional theory, incrementalism, game theory to public choice (Ibid).

Each of these perspectives viewed the subject-matter of (public) policy differently in terms of the compelling influences and authoritativeness involved in public policy-making. But then, none of these perspectives took for granted the

ecological or the environmental determinism involved in public policy formulation or public policy-making.

The foregoing and other experts’ “quibble” over the subject matter of (public policy) notwithstanding, most definitions of (public) policy argued Starling (1988) “boil down to the classic formulation that: a policy is a general statement of aims or goals (Ibid). And, without prejudice to the multiple analytical frameworks on the subject-matter of public policy as a concept, policy within any political environment, could be taken to mean “a kin of guide that delimits actions (of the relevant or appropriate functionaries of institution or government itself) (Ibid). Hence, it (public policy) has to follow the required process of problem formulation, planning/formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation which Anderson (op cit) referred to as “a sequential pattern of activity in which a member of functional categories of activities can be distinguished.” This required process, to Brewer and Deleon (1983) involves six stages: initiation; estimation; selection; implementation; evaluation; and termination.” This explains Peter Aucoin (1973) argument that “policies are the result of process which, deliberates and determines the values priorities of society.”

Put differently, without prejudice to the foregoing, public policy consist of the goals and assumptions that underlie what government does. It is a guide for government action and inaction. (Starling, 1974). Policy making implies that government must make choices to do one thing rather than another or to do little of this and a lot of that or not to do anything at all. It therefore implies that an attempt of a government not to act, is a policy. Public policy making in the language of Brain Smith (1974) implies “a rational activity of government that involves planning” policy making is a combination of politics and planning.

Public policy in a more explicit language is an action or inaction of the government and when there is a problem and such action or inaction is directed towards such problems for accomplishment of some purpose or goal. (Hugo, 1972) Arising from the definition, a policy is a course of action or inaction intended to accomplish some ends. This definition includes those conscious decisions not to act on a problem. In other words, a policy can be said to be a course

of action selected from among alternatives on the basis of some specific criteria. Deducing further from the above definition, public policy in roles purposive action is akin to planning, although the two terms are conceptually different. Anderson (op cit) differentiates policy from such other concepts as 'decision' by the fact that it is "what is actually done as against what is proposed or intended. Furthermore, in defining public policy, a distinction should be made between government policy and private policy. This is because policies are made not only by government bodies but as well as private organizations. Public policy therefore can be described as "those policies developed by governmental bodies and officials" (Ibid).

Anderson notes that there are five main features of public policy viz:

1. It is an action that is undertaken for a particular purpose.
2. It is a course of action rather than separate discrete decisions.
3. It is what government actually does rather than what it intends to do.
4. It may be either positive (actions) or negative (inactions).
5. It is based on law and administrative decision (Ibid).

This last point above buttresses the contribution of David Easton system as another analysis on public policies through which he defines it as the authoritative allocation of scarce societal values (Easton, 1965).

Arising from various definitions so far, reasons for making public policy can be identified.

Reasons for Policy Formulation

There are six major reasons why government formulate public policy. This, we shall discuss one by one.

- (a) Policy making is a problem solving phenomenon. That is to say, government formulates policies in order to provide solution to problem(s) affecting the public. Although in doing this, a distinction should be made between what is of public interest and what is of government interest. What is government interest may be incompatible with the public interest. Whether *public* or *governmental* interests, both actions would be deemed to be public policy making.

- (b) Government formulates policy in order to accelerate economic development. It is a known fact that, in the public administration, public policies involve planning especially at the implementation stage. If planning is part of policy making, and economic development involves planning, logically policy making is an instrument of economic development.
- (c) Government formulates policies in order to make for the continuity in the public administration. This is in line with the "theory of continuity of policy process". In the theory of continuity of policy process, it is believed that government comes, government goes but public administration remains forever. What actually makes for such continuity is public policy making. As one government comes and goes, initiation and implementation of public policy remain forever.
- (d) Government formulates policy in the interest of the public rather than the government. After all, government exists for the perpetuation and preservation of human life, and liberty. In performing this role, government can be accredited for policy making or simply put, government formulates policy in order to better the conditions of the populace.
- (e) Government initiates policy in order to render administration easy. This is referred to as an administrative purpose of policy initiation and implementation. The administrative functions (like planning, organising, staffing, co-ordinating and budgeting -(POSCORB) all combined, are instruments of public policy making.
- (f) Government formulates policies for their own selfish ends. This is to say, government's survival depends on the effective initiation and implementation of public policies.

Having itemized the purposes for policy initiation, our next endeavour is to discuss through illustration what is called "public policy hierarchy (PPH)".

PUBLIC POLICY HIERARCHY

The public policy hierarchy is regarded as "unbroken claim" through which policy passes before a solution to a given problem could be

solved (Fig. 1). The PPH is divided into four major categories viz: political policy, executive policy, administrative policy and technical policy.

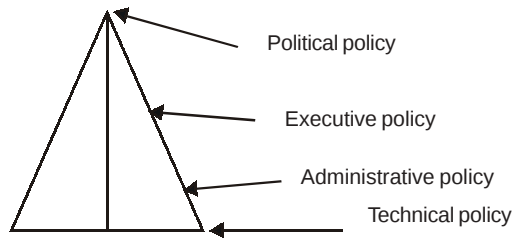


Fig. 1. The Public Policy Hierarchy

The *Political Policy* is regarded as a general policy process through which discussions are taken with broad objectives. It is political in the sense that a decision taken by the government aimed at solving some problems which may be multiple in nature. More specifically, political policy consists of the determination of major policy objectives in broad terms. The effect of such broad policy is to provide a general framework within which effective policy may be worked out.

The *Executive Policy* is regarded as the effective reduction of general or political policy into which concrete practical objectives manifest itself as a cabinet policy. Having done this, the policy would now move to *administrative sectors or policy*. This sector is what is called as "actuation". That is to say, it is a point where ministerial responsibility is carried out. This is the form in which the ministerial administration is carried out.

Finally, the *technical policy* is a day-to-day adoption by officials in working out administrative policies of the government. This stage is concerned with the implementational interpretation of policy contents by the seasoned technocrats and higher civil servants. The contents of policy are decoded by the technocrats for envisaged positivism vis-a-vis the *raison d'être* of such policies.

POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation of a policy follows its initiation or formulation for the purpose of this paper, implementation process would be seen as all activities that must be undertaken to carry

out an intention from its conception to realization.

A policy that is formulated which is not implemented cannot solve the problem. Implementation is putting the goals and objectives set forth in a policy decision into practice. Policy implementation therefore, includes all activities that must be undertaken on the course of action to be followed in order to realize the intended objectives of a given policy. The policy implementation to some policy analysts includes the time lag or period when an action is being conceived to the point when the objectives being conceived have been realized.

There are three elements in the implementation of a given policy namely (i) a decision to be made concerning the organizational structure. (ii) Policy goals must be translated into specific rules and regulations. (iii) Resources must be allocated and rules must be applied to the specific problems addressed by the policy.

Bearing the three major elements in mind, one can make a reference into a comment of Bamisaye (1983) when he asserts that "the success of any given policy depends on how well it has been implemented. "A policy that is well formulated may end in failure if not well implemented. But a policy that is badly formulated with good implementation may end into successful ground".

POLICY ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

The policy analysis is a supradisciplinary effort focusing on policy making. Its essence is the improvement of policy making through "the use of systematic knowledge, structural rationality and organized creativity." The big question that arises is "Against what grounds do we evaluate a policy?" The three major alternatives of grounds against which a given policy can be evaluated are: (i) against the promises of such policy; (ii) against the best known alternatives; and (iii) against the absence of a policy.

CRITERIA OF POLICY ANALYSIS

There are a number of criteria by which public policies have been studied by various scholars. These include efficiency, effectiveness, equity and impact analysis. Other criteria include feasibility, adequacy, appropriateness, net benefits, compliance, equality, public participa-

tion, freedom, predictability and procedural fairness. (Deniston et al., 1978)

Efficiency measures the relationship between the cost and benefits of a policy or programme. The costs and benefits may be in monetary or non-monetary form.

Effectiveness on the other hand measures the extent to which a particular programme or policy is meeting its targeted goals or objectives.

Equity however, focuses on the distributional effects of a policy in terms of “who gains or who loses” as a result of a particular programme or policy.

Adequacy involves the process of assessing a given policy rational or irrational to the problem at stake to be solved.

Feasibility deals with means of achieving the end of a given policy. An analyst would like to evaluate his policy in terms of available human and material resources. It is true that a given policy can be formulated and implemented with the means of scarce resources. When such happens there is no magic or evaluation rather to conclude instantly, that such policy is not feasible. Feasibility has to do with the conduciveness of the implementation of such a given policy.

Ethic deals with a situation when one talks about the ethical orientation of a given society during the course of policy implementation. It should be noted that there is a variation of ethical values among countries. To this end, a policy that is successful in a given country may not succeed in another society based on different ethical values.

Technological Assessment. This has to do with technological know-how of a given country. For example, where there are computers with other sophisticated technological equipment. Such a country can easily evaluate policies rather than a technological bankrupt country where evaluation on technological background is highly anachronistic.

Process of Public Policy Analysis

In dealing with the process of public policy analysis, one would be required to distinguish between policy output (PO) and policy impact (PI). Policy output refers to the actual activities that government perform by way of implementing policy plan. This leads to an input and output model of a given policy. This can be

illustrated with road construction by a given government. For example, for rural transformation, a government may initiate policy of road construction and tarring. Having pronounced the policy, the next stage and the part of the government is to constitute a Tender Board which will be responsible for the award of contract. It does not stop there and what follows is the awarding of the contract. Although, before this stage, government must have budgeted some amount of money for the road construction and tarring. At the end of the award, real construction and tarring commence. Analytically, the policy output of the road construction under illustration is the amount of road that can be physically observed as tarred. But, with the initial high budget for the proposed 250 kilometres, if the government end up with only 150 kilometres; the end product of 150 kilometres physically tarred out of the proposed 250 kilometres, is the policy output.

On the other hand, policy impact would also be explained by illustration emanating from the above. When the road under illustration has not been tarred, the drivers were driving with care with little or no accident recorded.

Conversely, when such road is now tarred, drivers are tempted to speed with high record of accidents. Tarring of roads as recorded in kilometres is the policy output while the recorded accidents that follows would be classified as policy impact. Also, the reduction of damages done to the vehicles after the construction is also an impact. To this end, there can be both positive and negative impact of a given policy.

The Environment of Public Policy

The public policy and its formulation as discussed herein so far, are usually dictated by the imperatives of the political setting or environment within which the policy makers exist. This is implicit in the fact that:

Policy inputs are the transmission sent from the environment to the conversion process of the administrative system. Inputs include demands for policy, resources; and support opposition, or apathy towards the actions of administrators (policy makers). (Sharkansky, 1978 op cit)

The essence of this is discernible from the diagram (Ibid) (Fig.2).

Feedback: represents influence that outputs have upon the environment in a way that shapes

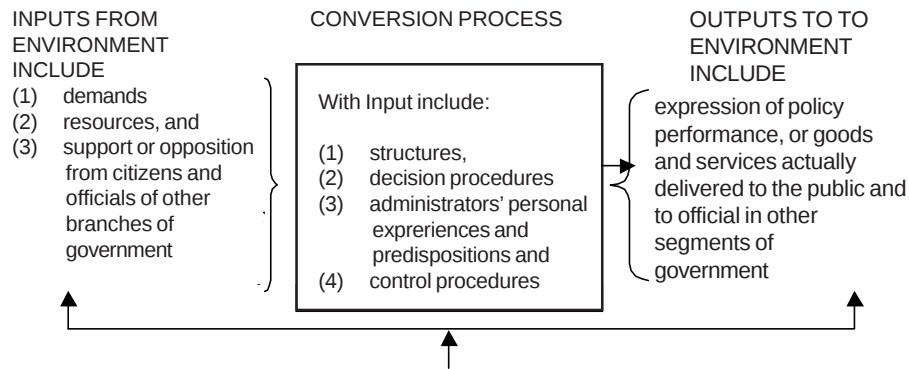


Fig. 2. The conversion of policy inputs into policy outputs

subsequent inputs.

Environment: include (1) clients, (2) costs of goods and services, and (3) members of the public and other government officials who support or oppose agencies, administrators, or programs.

If this discussion of public policy and its formulation vis-a-vis the indispensability of policy environment is correct, what then constitutes the subject-matter of the environment? Put differently, what is an environment? And what could be done to avail the policy makers maximization of the strengths and opportunities of the environment and, the maximization of the latter's threats and weaknesses?

Provision of answers to these questions and their linkage with the subject matter of public policy and its formulation is the core of the discussion that now follows.

Concepts of Environment, its Various Dimensions and Linkages with Public Policy and its Formulation

The issue of the environment is a multidisciplinary one. It has attracted the central concern of various disciplines within the social sciences. And, the disciplinary explanations of this concept have been dictated by the chauvinism of each discipline. In spite of this however, all dimensions of considerations that have been given to the concept of environment affect human beings who create and work within policy-making administrative setup and, who (e.g. policymakers) relate or attempts to regulate the policymaking center or administrative setup or establishments to environment.

Sociologists, using the disciplinary field of their calling (sociology) have emphasized the

"extent to which human beings or human organizations (e.g. policy-making establishment) are shaped by and, are products of environmental forces" (Forcese and Richer, 1975). Simply put, an environment refers to "all the external conditions and circumstances that surround an organism at a given time" Dressler and Willia, 1976). Given this line of explanatory effort, an environment has been argued to refer to "all the conditions, circumstances, and influences surrounding and affecting the development of an organism or group of organism" (Dressler and Willia, 1976).

Not only this, the environment is multi-dimensional with each dimension having its influence on those (e.g. policy matters) that exist within it. And, according to Dunfee et. al. myriad of factors surround or influence organizations (like the policy making establishments in the public sector). To these scholars, the major dimensions of any establishment's operational environment include: legal, political, social and economic components and, that, each of these constitutes a mini-environment that needs to be understood by the policy-makers in their formative, planning, formulation, implementation, evaluation and termination of public policy.

A synoptic perusal of these dimensions of environment shows that the legal environment includes the courts, legislative bodies, law enforcement agencies, practising bars, administrative boards, commissions and departments. It equally shows that the political environment encompasses the legislative processes at all levels of government. And, as for the economic environment, it deals with the commercial world of organization or policy-making establishment. It shows the structure of the market place and

its intimate intertwining-relationship with other environments (Ibid). The perusal equally shows that the social environment is the one which all members of the society are affected in one way or the other by the activities or policy pronouncements of governments.

A summation of the foregoing shows why policy-makers could or should not ignore the need to scan their operational environment and, why it is necessary for policy makers to complement policy formulation factors or authoritative decision making with socio-political and economic factors (e.g. reduction of unemployment, hiring of minorities, quota system, federal character, enhancing human wealth, life and welfare, etc.) where considering making operational decision.

The reason for this is clear, looking at the fact that the environment as explained above is a unit that offers opportunities and poses threats to policy making centres within the political system. This is particularly so in the sense that environment could be dichotomized in terms of how it affects the policy-makers and their policy formulation. In other words we could talk about Micro and Macro environments (i.e., internal and external environment).

The fact that public policy making or

formulation takes place within these environment necessitate the need - (as already discussed) – for the policy makers to understand them and their accompanying complexities. This is so looking at how the policy making is deeply embedded within the environment (Fig. 3).

Looking at these complex webs of influences and the almost unidimensional relationship that submerges the policy maker's of the policy-making center, the policy maker's monitoring and auditing of his operational environment becomes indispensable to his existence of continuous survival. This is the only way through which the opportunities offered and threats posed by the environment could be better or accurately analysed by the policy maker for the maximization of policy benefits and minimization of policy costs and failures. And, it basically explains the policy scholars' emphasis on environmental forces and their impact on public policy as does their call for the understanding of the ecology of public policy and its formulation.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have examined, using theoretical approach, the core issues on public policy and its environment. Our analytical orien-

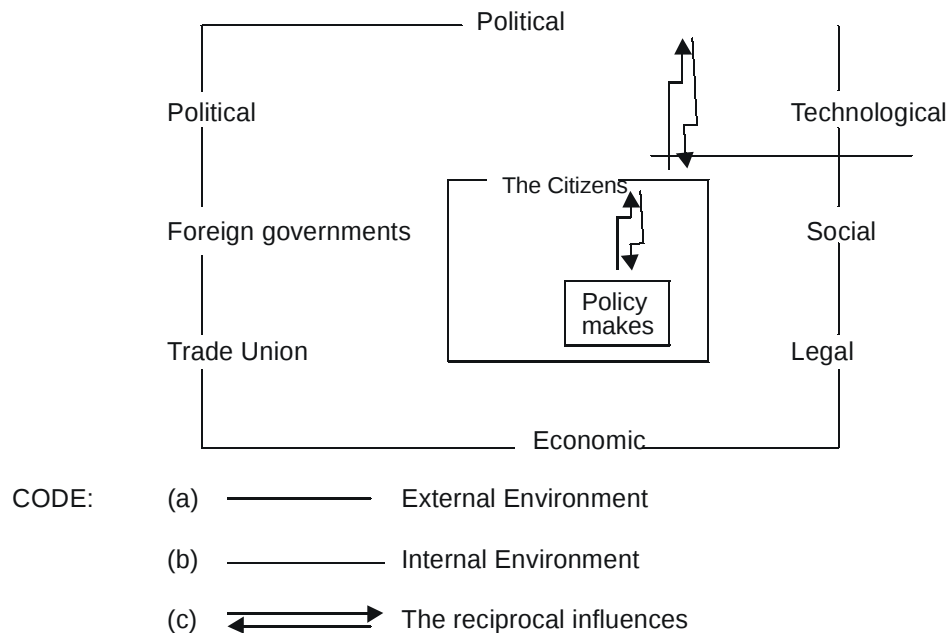


Fig. 3. The reciprocal relationship of the environment with the policy makers

tation in this regard enabled us to concretely peruse various intellectual and practical efforts that have been expended on this central issue in governance and administrative process.

In this process, the nitty-gritty of the concept of public policy was analytically explicated. Through this, the definitional pluralism of the concept of public policy was exhaustively examined by ways of indepth perusal of various scholar's contribution and experts' quibble on same. Consequently, we were able to highlight with precision that what now appears to be a near unanimity vis-a-vis the current conceptualization of public policy is the acceptance of the latter as the goals and assumptions that underlie what government does and what it does not do. Put, differently, our analytical consideration of the subject matter of public policy has enabled us to treat public policy as an action or inaction of government within a multidimensional environment.

Following this, the antecedents of policy making were articulated with due cognizance of the public policy hierarchy and, its affinity with a problem free conception, formulation, adoption, implementation, evaluation and termination of a given policy within any political system.

In addition, we identified the criteria of policy analysis as does the latter's requisite processes giving analytical recognition to the multidimensional environmental forces that constantly submerge the policy making center within any given political environment. Consequent on this, the indispensability of the political environment to public policy efficacy in our society was articulated with futuristic prescriptions vis-a-vis the required reconciling undercurrents of policy demands and outputs in our society.

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