
UNIT 4 IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC POLICY: CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

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4.0 LEARNING OUTCOME

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Understand and assess the importance of public policy;
- Discuss and analyse as to why we study public policy; and
- Explain the national policy agenda in a global context.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Public policy forms a significant component of the society and government. It is a frequently used term in our daily life and in our academic literature where we often make references to national health policy, the new education policy, wage policy, agricultural policy, foreign policy and so on. It is an area, which had to do with those spheres that are labeled as public. The concept of public policy presupposes that there is a domain of life that is not private or purely individual, but held in common. This Unit will highlight the importance of public policy, role of the state, and national policy agenda.

4.2 IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC POLICY

Public policy focuses on what John Dewey (1927) wrote as "the public and its problems". It is concerned with how issues and problems come to be defined, and constructed, and how they are placed on the political and party agenda. But it is also the study of "how, why and to what effect governments pursue particular courses of action and inaction", or as Dye puts it, with "what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it makes". This study of the nature, causes, and effects of public policies requires that we avoid a narrow focus and draw on a variety of approaches and disciplines.

It is maintained that the delivery of goods and services is important, but as Kirlin notes, "it is not the critical role of government. Government is the institution of society with singular obligations to facilitate societal choice making and action. Its ability to make decisions and to act are the dominant dimensions by which governmental performance should be judged". Parsons says, "The wider purposes of public policy as involving enlightenment, the fuller development of individuals in society, and the development of consent, consensus, social awareness and legitimacy, rather than simply the delivery of goods and services, is a theme which has preoccupied the work of leading scholars in the field of public policy and policy analysis, such as. Lasswell, Lindblom, and Etzioni." It is a theme which, in the context of the appearance of public-sector 'management' and the notion of the citizen as customer, we do well to remember and articulate today. Public policy involves improving the democratic or political capacities of people, and not simply the efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery of services. This means extending democratic control over the managerial arrangements through reinvigorating and reforming governance arrangements.

For many scholars the study of public policy and policy analysis has an important role in education. For Lasswell, public policy as public education was vital if democracy was not to fall prey to the interests and manipulations of powerful elites. The ultimate aim of policy-making, he believed, was in the formation of values, which could shape the full development of individuals and society as a whole. Thus, public policy and policy analysis has (as Lasswell understood) its source and focus in the personnel and in the self.

For many scholars public policy should, above all, be concerned with values, the most important of which are the transmission and application of knowledge and democratic skills to as wide a public as possible. The goal of policy analysis should be to facilitate a policy-making process, which is informed by enlightenment and emancipation and which can keep "alive the pluralism of authority and control that prevents the absolutization of political power". As we have studied, there are models and approaches that are more concerned with public policy as public education and which stress values, such as, 'participation', 'communication', 'decentralisation' and 'community'. These alternative models offer the prospect of using dialogue, communication, cooperation, and social learning as modes of both policy 'production' and 'delivery' so as to promote a more 'operationalised citizenship' and active participation in the making of public choices.. This may well require a radical shift away from the so-called 'realistic' conceptualisation of representative democracy towards an openly idealistic vision of public policy as public learning and education. This re-orientation of public policy as a mode of public learning will also involve the re-design of the institutional context of policy-making. It may be emphasised that institutions do matter, and the challenge for the future will be to design and adapt political and social institutions especially to improve the communicative—rather than the instrumental—rationality of democratic societies.

At this point, it is necessary to highlight a few aspects of the study of public policy. The approaches, concepts, and strategies contribute towards fulfilment of the goals of government. The study of public policies, therefore, represent a powerful approach for this purpose. Public policy is also an important device for moving a social system from the past to the future. It helps to shape the future.

Public policy is generally influenced by the past. How the present dimensions of public policy in the developing countries emerged, how they now appear, and how the present sustains them are important questions in the study of public policy. Over the years the growth of public functions has paralleled the growth of public policies. The study of the past is very important as it helps in explaining the present policy system. Past policies often perpetuate themselves into present and future policies.

The study of public policy helps in defining a policy problem. The definition of a problem may sometimes generate more conflict than consensus. In policy-making, the locus of political power tends to influence the definition of a problem. In this context, Schattschneider says, "He who determines what politics is about runs the country, because the definition of alternatives is the choice of conflicts, and the choice of conflicts allocates power". Thus, present policy-making can be thought as problem-solving behaviour, realising that the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power.

The earliest writings of social scientists reveal an interest in the policies pursued by various governments, and their impact on society. Yet, the focus of attention has never really been on the policies themselves, but rather on the political processes and institutions of government. This is not to say, however, that traditional curriculum was unconcerned with policy. In the western countries constitutional policy, foreign policy, and policies relating to civil rights were also the subjects of attention. The focus of attention was primarily on the institutions and structures of government in which public policy was formulated. The studies, however, did not explore the linkages between important institutional arrangements **and** the content of public policy. Currently, the focus of public administration is shifting to public policy -- to the description, analysis and explanation of the causes and consequences of government activity. Thomas Dye puts the matter in this way that public policy "... involves a description of the content of public policy; an assessment of the impact of environmental forces on the content of public policy; and analysis of the effect of various institutional arrangements and political processes on public policy; an inquiry into the consequences of various public policies for the political system; and an evaluation of the impact of public policies on society, in terms of both expected and unexpected consequences".

Earlier, most people assumed that once the legislature passed a law and appropriated money for it, the purposes of the law would be achieved. They believed that governments could achieve such goals as the elimination of poverty, and the prevention of crime through the adoption of right policies. But now there is a growing uneasiness among social scientists about the effectiveness of governments. The result has been the sudden awakening of interest in the study of public policy. Policy, in the main, may be studied for two reasons, that is, for developing the study of policy science, and for political and administrative reasons.

4.2.1 Developing Study of Policy Science

First of all, public policy can be studied with a view to gaining greater knowledge and understanding of the causes and consequences of policy decisions. Public policy may be regarded as either a dependent or an independent variable. When it is viewed as a dependent variable, our focus of attention is on environmental factors that help to shape the content of policy. For instance, the study of public policy in this arena helps us to understand how environmental protection and industrialisation help to shape the content of policy. On the other hand, if public policy is viewed **as** an independent variable, our focus of attention shifts to the impact of policy on the environment. For example, what effect does economic policy have on the conditions of labour? By raising such questions we can improve our understanding of the linkages between the economic environment and public policy.

An understanding of these linkages contributes to the development of policy science. Not only this, an understanding of the causes and consequences of public policy helps us to apply scientific knowledge to the solution of practical social problems. The professionals, if they understand and know something about public policy, would be in a better position to say something useful concerning how governments or public authorities can act to achieve their policy goals. Such advice can either be on what policies can be pursued for achieving particular goals or what

environmental factors are conducive to the development of a given policy. Indeed, factual knowledge is a prerequisite to solving the problems of society. In other words, the study of public policy helps the development of professional advice about how to achieve particular goals.

4.2.2 Political and Administrative Reasons

Public policy can also be studied for political and administrative reasons in order to ensure that governments select and adopt appropriate policies. The study of public policy has much to offer to the development of administration in different sectors of the economy. It will enable the administration to engage in issues of public importance; in the transformation of desired values into public policy-making; and in demanding meaningful actions from public servants. The manifest concern of social scientists is with what governments should do by coming up with appropriate public policy. They cannot be 'silent' or 'impotent' on current social and political problems and that academics in public administration have a moral obligation to put forward specific policy agenda to deal with given problems.

They should advance the level of political knowledge and improve the quality of public policy in whatever ways they think best, notwithstanding the fact that substantial disagreement exists in society over what constitutes appropriate policies.

The goal of policy analysis should be to facilitate a policy-making process, which is informed by the pursuit of democratic values and enlightened goals. Parsons concludes: "It is the clarification, shaping and sharing of values so as to extend and enhance democratization which still remains the core and vital task of the theory and practice of public policy". Policies do more than effect change in societal conditions. They also hold a people together and maintain an orderly state.

4.3 ROLE OF THE: STATE IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

To understand the nature and utility of public policies, it is important to comprehend the nature of the state's role. At the outset it may be emphasised that the role of the state changes with the change in the nature of the state. The present nature of the state differs greatly from that seen in the preceding two centuries, especially before 1945.

Beginning around 1945 significant changes began to take place, which altered the nature of development and greatly complicated its objectives. After World War II, the independence of former colonies has been one of the most important events to mark 'independence from dependence'. This has been true in most developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America and other parts of the world. Most developing countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa came out of the colonial period, with a strong belief in state-dominated economic development. The state would mobilise resources and people; and direct them toward economic growth, and the eradication of poverty and social injustice. State control of the economy, following the example of the erstwhile Soviet Union, was central to this strategy.

The new interventionist philosophy had its counterpart in the development strategy of the day, adopted by many developing countries at independence, which emphasised the prevalence of market failures and accorded the state a central role in correcting them. Centralised planning, corrective interventions in resource allocation, and a heavy state hand in infant-industry development were part and parcel of this strategy.

Development goals in the later part of the 1970s (1976-1980) and the policies to be pursued to achieve those goals have been reflected in the national development plans of developing countries.

In their plans, the focus of policy was on such basis as the “expansion and diversification of the production of goods and services, an increase in employment opportunities, an improvement in both the level and distribution of income, the elimination of extreme poverty, an increase in self-reliance in carrying out development tasks, and the mobilisation of natural, human and financial resources in the common cause of national-building”. But the cost of state intervention and development strategy were suddenly exposed when the debt crisis hit in the 1980s, and oil prices plunged.

The collapse of the Soviet Union shook the centralised planning model based on state activism. Suddenly, government failure, including the failure of publicly owned firms, seemed everywhere glaringly evident. Governments began to adopt policies designed to reduce the scope of state's intervention in the economy. States curbed their involvement in production, prices, and trade. Market-friendly strategies took hold in large parts of the developing world. The pendulum had swung from the state-dominated development model of the 1960s and 1970s to the minimalist state of the 1980s and 1990s.

With such radical shifts in perspective, governments had to change their role. To meet their interest obligations, countries mired in debt squeezed critically important programmes in education, health, and infrastructure as often as they cut low-priority programmes, bloated state enterprises and civil service rolls. The result, seen most starkly in Africa, the former Soviet Union, and even parts of Latin America, was neglect of the state's vital functions, threatening social welfare and eroding the foundations for market development.

The effect of rejection of government has shifted attention from the debate of state versus market to a more fundamental crisis in state's capability. In some countries, the crisis has led to outright collapse of the state. In others, the erosion of the state's capability has led non-governmental and people's organisations-civil society more broadly-to try to take its place. In their embrace of markets and rejection of state activism, many have wondered whether the market and civil society could ultimately supplant the state. “But the lesson of a half-century's thinking and rethinking of the state's role in development is more nuanced. State-dominated development has failed, but so will stateless development. Development without an effective state is impossible.”

The World Bank, in its World Development Report, lays stress on a two-pronged strategy to improve the state's ability to enhance economic and social welfare. The first task is to match the state's role to its existing capability. The second is to reinvigorate the state's capability through mles, partnerships, and competitive pressures outside and within the state.

4.4 NATIONAL POLICY AGENDA IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

Public policies are everywhere being conditioned by the external environment. It is impossible to separate the external environmental factors as they invariably influence the political processes and policy outcomes. The influence, being brought to bear on socio-economic problems of a country by agencies, such as, the United Nations and its allied agencies (WHO, ILO, UNEP, UNDP, etc.), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, Asian Development Bank, European Policy Forum, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) etc. is of critical importance in shaping its policies,

Developing countries are particularly vulnerable to global events and actions and have come to depend heavily on the international community for inflows of capital and technology. Consequently, national policies are interlocked with global processes. For instance, the price of oil and other major commodities in the global market tend to influence domestic markets and public policies of

developed as well as developing countries. Given the impact of the forces of globalisation and liberalisation, the boundaries of national political systems are no longer impermeable to outside pressures and influences. Public policy now takes place in a global context as well as in national political systems. With the acceptance of the regime of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the international environment has an added role to play in influencing the national policies.

As multinational corporations and international organisations come to exercise a great deal of influence, the capacity of national policy-makers to frame their own agendas is correspondingly reduced. National policies on labour, environment, drugs, customs and excise levies, taxes on commodities, subsidies or matters of trade have to reckon with the transnational economic context. With globalisation there is a greater scope of interaction between a nation state and other countries. A nation state has now come to exercise less control on its own policy agenda than it was in the second half of the twentieth century. From the national perspective this means that the policy agenda may be global but the policy-making and implementation remain national. Global politics has an added role to play in the determination of national policies, especially of developing nations. Global issues interact with national issues, which in turn interact with the local level. The process is termed as 'glocal' which in turn interacts with the local level. The emergence of regional economic blocks is yet another factor. For example, in the European context a new policy level is developing in terms of a Europeification of national policy-making. Europe's common currency (Euro notes and coins issued by the European Central Bank from 1 January, 2002) has opened the way to a closer political and economic union among European nations. Similarly, most developing countries undertook significant liberalisation of their trade regimes during the 1990's and the beginning of the 21st century, slashing tariffs, reducing non-tariff barriers to trade, and privatising public enterprises. It is, therefore, important for policy-makers to take account of the global processes when considering the context of policy problems in a national setting.

i) **Environment**

Pollution of the air and water, deforestation and loss of fertile soil are becoming critical problems with serious consequences for health, food production, productivity, and perhaps even the ability of the earth to support human life. Protection and improvement of the quality of the environment has become a global issue since the 1980s. There is a sustained pressure on national policy-makers to change or modify their policy positions due to growing global environmental stress.

The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) observed, "The traditional forms of national sovereignty are increasingly challenged by the realities of ecological and economic interdependence. Nowhere is this more true than in the shared ecosystems and in 'the global commons – those parts of the planet that fall outside national jurisdictions'". Industrial growth places pressures on policy-makers to prevent and control pollution. International agreements on ways to control pollution and close ties between environmentalists have provided an exchange of information that shapes the policy agenda. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Brazil in June 1992, produced treaties to control global warming and preserve the diversity of species. The meeting issued the *Rio Declaration*, setting forth broad principles of environmental protection and sustainable development, and Agenda 21, a detailed plan for combating various environmental problems. In such sectors as land, fresh water, forests, biodiversity and climate change, the 1997 UN assessment found that conditions either were no better than in 1992 or had worsened.

ii) **Poverty and Population Growth**

Developing countries face increasingly serious population growth and poverty problems. Despite higher economic growth, the number of poor people has increased mostly because of population

growth in the developing countries. It has also resulted in uneven development and increasing concentration of wealth.

Almost half the world's people (some 3 billion) live on less than US \$2 a day, and a fifth (some 1.2 billion) live on less than US \$1 a day. This horrific level of poverty persists despite an unprecedented increase in global wealth in the past century. As the 21st century begins, growing number of people and rising levels of consumption per capita have been depleting natural resources, and in developing countries increasing the dimensions of poverty.

Poverty and population growth have now become global concerns. The World Bank's (WB) new strategy proposes, for example, an approach to fighting poverty. The three-pronged approach of the WB focuses on increasing opportunities for people, facilitating their empowerment, and enhancing their security. Policy-makers and environmentalists now largely agree that efforts to reduce poverty and population growth, and to achieve better living standards can be closely linked and are mutually reinforcing. The policy agenda at the global level is now on slowing the increase in population and attacking poverty.

Most countries, especially developing ones, have come out with national health policies, which are global in context. "Health for All" by 2000 AD, for example, for India was drawn as a policy measure in the wake of Alma-Ata Declaration.

Family limitation is seen as a strategy to reducing population growth. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action states that "the aim of family planning programmes must be to enable couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children" with a view to reducing population size. Governments of nations that sign international documents of principles make a commitment to act on these principles. China has worked for nearly three decades on a zero-per cent population growth strategy. The success of the Chinese Strategy in containing population growth has provided a model to other countries facing this problem.

iii) **AIDS**

As a communicable disease, AIDS has become a serious concern to the international community. AIDS has already killed more than 20 million people, and today 40 million people are living with HIV/AIDS – 23 million of them in Africa alone. Every day another 15,000 people are infected. And around the world, the epidemic is having a huge effect on GNP.

Since it is a global issue, the policy analyst must find a global solution involving a coordinated international cooperation and national political action. Johnathan Mann, the Director of the WHO's AIDS Programme stressed that AIDS is bringing about a 'new paradigm of health' because of four factors: "it is a global problem; it is understood and spoken as a global problem; and it is known worldwide; and AIDS is combated at a truly global level."

iv) **Drugs**

The use of drugs has become an equally global concern. Earlier, it was regarded as a social problem and the focus was on promotion of a national policy. However, since the 1980s drug use, and smuggling of narcotics across national boundaries have posed a serious menace to the international community, requiring global cooperation and action. The international concern has pinpointed the need for curbing the supply and transportation of drugs from the producer nations, such as, Thailand, Pakistan, Myanmar, Columbia, Peru and Bolivia.

v) **Trade and Industry**

Changes have occurred in industry as a consequence of global economic changes and shifts. The major sources of global shift are transnational corporations, which organise production on a world-

wide scale, the policies pursued by national governments, and the enabling technologies of transport, communication, and production. This has largely weakened the ability of national governments to make policies, independently, of those changes. In this context, Dicken observes, "...the well-being of nations, regions, cities and other communities depends increasingly not merely on events in their own backyards but on what happens at a much larger geographical scale... We need a global perspective".

However, national policy-makers have the task of formulating policies which help to create a business climate. The global industrial environment interacts with the national economic processes, consequently, national policies have been increasingly influenced by activities and events happening outside their national boundaries. So the capacity of the national policy-makers to frame their own agendas is considerably reduced.

vi) **Privatisation Policies**

The 1990s witnessed a marked trend towards privatisation. Instead of government control, there has been now a renewed emphasis on privatisation and competition throughout the world. Governments of most countries, both developed and developing, have adopted policies of transferring government-controlled enterprises to the private sector; and opening up a large number of industries to the private sector to encourage competition. Privatisation is now a widely accepted approach not merely in Europe, South and North America, Australia, and New Zealand, but also in countries of Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe.

vii) **Terrorism**

Terrorism is another global problem, which is spreading like a cancer. In India, for example, People's War Group in Andhra Pradesh, the Maoist Communist Centre in Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa, Lashkar-e-Toiba, Hizbul-Mujahideen and Jaishe-e-Mohammad in Jammu & Kashmir have been operating as terrorist organisations. Sri Lanka is wrecked by Tamil extremist organisations like LTTE, which have developed a formidable network spanning across countries of South-East Asia, Europe and North America. Attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in the United States on 11th September and attack on India's Parliament on 13 December in 2001 are two important dates that made the whole world to realise that terrorism had challenged the world community. The Osama Bin Laden phenomenon has not only internationalised terrorism, but it has also aggravated cross-border terrorism.

There were several wars in the last century, including two World Wars, but the first year of this century saw a radically different scenario – highly motivated groups of people launching attacks on nation-states. The shadowy figure of the terrorist has loomed large in homes and outside, menacingly. The sub-continent especially is in turmoil with conflicts emerging sharply in India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

viii) **Other Global Issues**

It may be added that the world is becoming reluctantly internationalist, recognising that diverse domestic social and economic issues (pollution, climate change, labour, trade, industry, agriculture, health, education, nuclear war, famine, etc.) are items on the national political agenda, which are tied up with global processes. Some diseases caused by virus do not respect national boundaries. The outbreak of bird-flu, which affected the poultry across continents is a case in point. The virus was carried through migratory birds. Efforts aimed at controlling the spread of such a virus require policies and actions at the national as well as multinational levels.

The Asian tsunami (December 2004) affected property and lives in 13 nations of the Indian Ocean region. The disaster has demonstrated the need for strategies of disaster mitigation and preparedness

both at the national and multinational levels on a coordinated basis is yet another example. Such instances indicate the need for policy-making at the national level with collaborative arrangements at the multinational or global level.

4.5 CONCLUSION

This Unit notes that policy-making is highly analytical process embedded in politics, and is influenced by a complex set of forces. It begins with the demands people or interest groups have about the actions they want the government to take. The study of public policy as a distinct academic area has been helped by scientific contributions of scholars in the field. Public policy has assumed considerable importance in response to the increasing complexity of the society. It is not only concerned with the description and explanation of the causes and consequences of government activity, but also with the development of scientific knowledge about the forces shaping public policy. The study of public policy helps to understand and analyse various problems and render advice to policy makers. Public policy is an important mechanism for moving a social system from the past to the future. The global socio-economic framework interacts with the domestic economic processes and the political agenda on policies pursued by governments of nation states. The success of nation states in policy performance is now being increasingly influenced by forces and factors outside the national boundaries. Terrorism has become a new menace affecting peace, security, and the resources of several countries.

4.6 KEY CONCEPTS

- Globalisation** : Globalisation as a term has gained wide attention and recognition. To Albrow, 'globalisation' refers to "all those processes by which the people of the world are incorporated into a single world society, global society". He further says that "globalism is one of the forces which assist in the development of globalisation."
- Market Economy** : It is an economy where resources are allocated for alternative uses by exchange in the market through demand and supply.

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4.8 ACTIVITIES

- 1) "Past policies often perpetuate themselves into present and future policies." Discuss the statement with a few illustrations.
- 2) Describe the views of Harold Lasswell and Thomas Dye on public policy.
- 3) How does the global context shape the national policy agenda? Discuss.