

Public Policy Analysis: A Critical Overview

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Abstract

This paper investigates the concept of public policy analysis that has been developed and refined over the past 50 years. Its purpose is to examine the concept of public policy analysis by clarifying its definition, conceptual models of public policy analysis, steps of policy analysis and six analytical dimensions for analyzing public policy. In most real-world policy situations there are many possible alternatives, many uncertainties, many stakeholders and many consequences of interest. Also, there is usually no single decision maker and little chance of obtaining agreement on a single set of preferences among the consequences. As a result, there is no way to identify an optimal solution. Instead, policy analysis uses a variety of tools to develop relevant information and present it to the parties involved in the policymaking process in a manner that helps them come to a decision. The paper discusses a brief definition of public policy, analytical exploration into the conceptual models of public policy analysis, steps of policy analysis and dimensions and relationships among the dimensions for analysing public policy.

Key words: public policy analysis, policymaker, decision making, government.

1. Introduction

The world is rapidly changing, thereby, future is uncertain. Policymakers are faced with policy alternatives that are often numerous, diverse and produce multiple consequences that are far-reaching yet difficult to anticipate. Different groups perceive and value different consequences differently. Nevertheless, public policymakers have a responsibility to develop and implement policies that have the best chance of contributing to the health, safety and well-being of the citizens. Along with full of uncertainties and limited data simply identifying the key policy issues is a difficult task. In this vein, without analysis, important policy choices are based on hunches and guesses; sometimes with regrettable results. Over the past 50 years, policy analysts in the developed countries have developed a systems-based approach and a set of tools for examining public policy issues that illuminate the uncertainties and their implications for policymaking, that identify tradeoffs among the alternative policies and that support the policymaking process.

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The present study critically investigates the concept of public policy analysis by discussing the definitions, conceptual models and steps of policy analysis. It also explores into the six analytical dimensions for analyzing public policy to assess the concept of public policy analysis.

1.1 Setting the Context

Public policy analysis is a rational, systematic approach to making policy choices in the public sector. It is a process that generates information on the consequences that would follow the adoption of various policies. It uses a variety of tools to develop this information and to present it to the parties involved in the policymaking process in a manner that helps them come to a decision. As long as human dignity and meaning exist as important values, social science cannot achieve the rigor of the physical sciences because it is impossible to separate human beliefs from the context and process of analysis (Heineman *et al.* 1990). Nevertheless, policy analysis uses the scientific method. This means that the work is open and explicit, objective and empirically based, consistent with existing knowledge and the results are verifiable and reproducible.

The main purpose of public policy analysis is to assist policymakers in choosing a course of action from among complex alternatives under uncertain conditions. Most importantly, it is a process, each step of which is critical to the success of a policy and must be linked to the policymakers, to other stakeholders and to the policymaking process. Unfortunately, although a policy action may be designed with a single goal in mind, it will seldom have an effect on only one outcome of interest. Policy choices, therefore, depend not only on measuring the outcomes of interest relative to the policy goals and objectives, but identifying the preferences of the various stakeholders and identifying tradeoffs among the outcomes of interest given these various sets of preferences. Therefore, the exploration of the effects of alternative policies on the full range of the outcomes of interest under a variety of scenarios and the examination of tradeoffs among the policies requires a structured analytical process that supports the policymaking process.

1.2 Significance of the Study

Public policy is the heart, soul, and identity of governments everywhere (Cochran and Malone 2014). Policy analysis describes the investigations that produce accurate and useful information for decision

makers. The importance of sound public policy analysis in achieving various goals related to the growth and development of a nation and its citizens cannot be overemphasized. For example, the adoption and implementation of public policies helped the nation recover from the higher inflation and mobilized the country to respond to economic crisis. Conversely, without sound public policy planning, a nation languishes and cannot keep up with an ever-changing world. For all of these reasons, public policy analysis studies are of the utmost importance, as they help scholars, politicians, political scientists, and a better-informed public to analyze every policy in depth, identifying its strengths and weaknesses, in order to improve policy choices, formulations, and implementation. Much like an 'art' or 'craft', significant parts of the policy analysis discipline can be taught to and learned by professionals working in, for, or with the public sector (Wildavsky 1979).

1.3 Objective of the study

The main purpose of this study is to critically investigate the concept of public policy analysis. To fulfill the purpose, this study aims to explore definitions of public policy analysis, analyse various conceptual models of public policy analysis, discuss steps of policy analysis, and examine six analytical dimensions for public policy analysis and the relationship among them.

2. Methodology

This study is mainly descriptive and analytical in nature. All the relevant data and information are collected from secondary sources. This study was carried out on the basis of secondary data such as published books, journals articles and authentic reports of various organisations. Some figures are used for better analysis and representation of data collected and modified from available secondary sources.

3. Public Policy Analysis

In a broad sense, the analysis of public policy dates back to the beginning of civilization. The academic study of public policy emerged as a major subfield within the discipline of political science in 1960s. This section discusses definitions of public policy analysis, investigates different conceptual models, explores into steps and analyse six dimensions for public policy analysis.

3.1 What is Public Policy Analysis?

Policy analysis is "an applied social science discipline which employs multiple methods of inquiry, in the contexts of argumentation and public debate, to create, critically assess, and communicate policy relevant information" (Dunn 1994) [with the intent of] "finding solutions to practical problems" (*Dunn, 2011*). In addition, public policy analysis refers to the activities, methodology, and tools that are used to give aid and advice in a context of public policymaking (Radin 2002; Mayer et al. 2004; Fischer, Miller and Sidney 2007). This type of policy analysis can be seen as the 'interventionist' or 'prescriptive' branch that stems from the policy sciences tree (Enserink, Koppenjan and Mayer 2013).

3.2 Conceptual Models for Public Policy Analysis

Models are widely used in the social sciences to investigate and illuminate causal mechanisms and understand the conditions in which certain outcomes are expected to occur. Some conceptual models are simply used to clarify our thinking about politics and public policy. Different models can identify important aspects of policy problems and provide explanations for public policy and even predict consequences. The following is a selection of some of the models frequently used by policy analysts to highlight certain aspects of policy behaviors.

3.2.1 Institutional Model

The institutional model focuses on policy as the output of government as the ultimate Decision making authority (Clarke and Primo 2007). The model emphasizes constitutional provisions, judicial decisions, and common law obligations. A policy process does not become a public policy until it is adopted, implemented, and enforced by some government institution. This model is followed by some of the developing countries like Bangladesh. The major stakeholders in Bangladesh's policy formulation process includes, the cabinet, the ministries, parliament, political parties, bureaucracy, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, the private sector, mass media and the international donor community (Aminuzzaman 2015). However, government institutions are crucial in that once a policy is officially adopted; the government provides legitimacy to that policy by enforcing it through government institutions. Government policies provide reciprocal legal rights and duties that must be recognized by involved citizens. Finally, governments alone have a monopoly on the legitimate use of coercive force in society and on sanction violators. One of the drawbacks of this model is that some very successful interest

groups focus their efforts on influencing critical institutions of government rather than winning popular support.

3.2.2 Incremental Model

This model focuses on how public policy decisions are made. Those who support this model suggest that public policy is primarily a continuation of past government activities with only incremental changes. Incrementalism, a conservative ideal, holds that current policy and programs possess certain legitimacy as they already exist. Groups who are beneficiaries support the continuation of the status quo, and politicians generally accept the legitimacy of established programs and are inclined to continue them because the consequences of adopting and implementing completely new or different programs are not easy to predict. In short, concentrating on increases, decreases, or modifications of current programs is simpler and less risky for policymakers than embarking on totally new programs (Cochran and Malone 2014).

The model is often criticized because it does not require the establishment of clear goals. It tinkers with current programs with the hope that goals and alternatives will become clearer over time. Again, some argue that breaking down the implementation of major changes into smaller steps is necessary to make the changes more acceptable. For example, an administration proposal to raise the minimum wage by a significant amount is broken down into smaller increments over several years. Political conflict and stress is increased when decision making focuses on major policy changes that raise fears of significant gains or losses if the change does not have bipartisan support. The search for consensus can be expected to begin with choices close to current programs and policies or positions previously endorsed by the political party now out of power. The high costs and risks of significant changes in policy, without bipartisan support, illustrates why many policymakers are more likely to push for incremental changes.

3.2.3 Group Theory

This model, also called pluralism, holds that politics represents the struggle among groups to influence public policy. Public policy at any given time actually represents the equilibrium reached in the group struggles. The role of government is primarily to establish the legal and regulatory rules in the group struggle. Politicians engage in bargaining and negotiating with groups in an effort to form a majority coalition of groups. The political parties are viewed as coalitions of interest groups (Walker 2000). The model holds that individuals and groups have overlapping memberships, which prevents any one group

from moving too far from moderate values and any single interest from consistently dominating other groups. Pluralists claim that the power of each group is checked by the power of competing groups, resulting in a marketplace of policymaking in almost perfect competition.

Critics of pluralism claim that in fact different groups have vastly different resources. Some interests, such as those representing businesses or affluent professions, are very well organized and financed, while others, such as those representing poor or immigrant groups, have fewer financial resources and are poorly organized, undermining any claim of group equilibrium. Some critics of the theory claim that the model ignores the role public officials' play in public policy making.

3.2.4 Elite Model

The elite model views public policy as reflecting the preferences and values of the power elite. The theory claims that society is divided between the elites who have power and the non-elites who do not. Every society has more non-elites than elites. Democracy is often thought to be good for the poor, since the poor greatly outnumber elites. Conventional wisdom suggests that democracy will lead to the choice of policies that reflect the preferences of the poor. In democratic societies the elites are concerned about the danger posed by the non-elites who could unite and overwhelm them at the ballot box and redistribute wealth downward. The elites shape mass opinion while mass opinion has little influence on elites. Generally, government officials tend to adopt and implement policies decided on by the elite, which flow in a downward direction to the masses. According to the model, elites permit the assimilation of some non-elites into the elite category, but only after they accept elite values, in the process encouraging system stability and reducing the threat of revolution. This model also supports the notion that changes in public policy should be small and incremental and reflect changes in elite values (not demands from the masses).

The implication of the model is that the state of policymaking rests primarily with the elites. The masses are generally apathetic and poorly informed. Mass opinions are manipulated by elites through control of much of the "mass media." Thus, the mass has only an indirect influence on policy decisions.

3.2.5 Conflict Model

This model developed by E. E. Schattschneider focuses on the essential elements of public participation in the decision making process. He criticized the classical definition of democracy as government "by the

people” as being far from the reality. His working definition of democracy took into account the people’s limitations as well as their powers. Instead, he defined democracy as “a competitive political system in which competing leaders and organizations define the alternatives of public policy in such a way that the public can participate in the decision-making process” (Schattschneider 1960).

In fact, the ability to control the scope of a conflict is absolutely crucial to achieving a favorable outcome in a political battle of wills. Special interest groups influence the scope of the conflict by lobbying for specific legislation (Ibid). Group theory claims that people’s interests are represented to the government by various organizations in almost perfect market equilibrium. The model holds that competition between special interest groups, such as those representing the food industry or health care groups that argue for legislation, results in compromise and moderation. In contrast, conflict model argues that most pressure groups are pro-business and have an upper-class bias. Even most non-business groups have an upper-class bias. These pressure groups work to improve the well-being of their relatively small group against the public interest. Business groups, for example, desire deregulation, fight for lower taxes, and want government to take their side against labor in conflict. The mobilized business groups increase their influence by contributing to the political candidates most supportive of their goals. Thus, according to conflict model, pressure politics represents the whole community is a myth. Pressure politics is very selective and represents upper-income interests very well but is not well designed or successful in mobilizing support for the “public interest.” The scope of the conflict model, along with the group model, reinforces the elite model but focuses on how citizen involvement is related to the size of the conflict in public policy decision making.

3.3 The Steps of Policy Analysis

The policy analysis process generally involves performing a set of logical steps (Findeisen and Quade 1985). The steps are not always performed in the same order and there is usually feedback among the steps. The steps are summarized in Figure 1 and briefly described below.

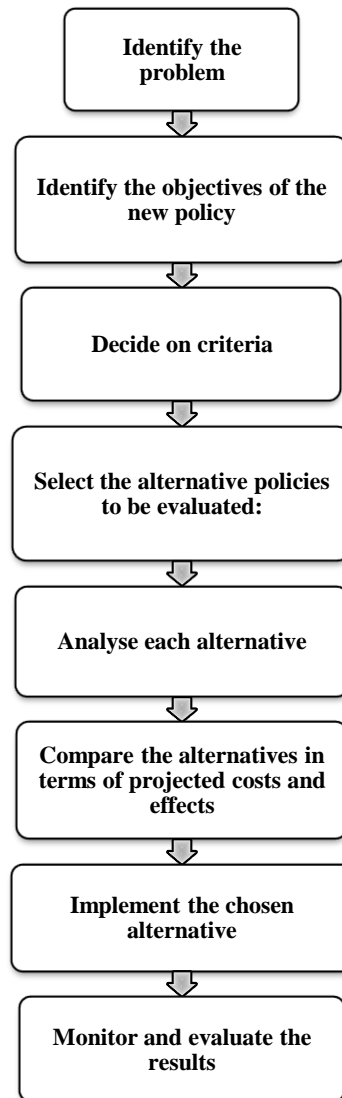


Figure 1: Eight steps of public policy analysis

i. Identify the problem: This step sets the boundaries for what follows. It involves identifying the questions or issues involved, fixing the context within which the issues are to be analysed and the policies will have to function, clarifying constraints on possible courses of action, identifying the people who will be affected by the policy decision, discovering the major operative factors and deciding on the initial approach.

ii. Identify the objectives of the new policy: The policymaker has certain objectives that, if met, would ‘solve’ the problem. In this step, the policy objectives are determined. Most public policy problems involve multiple objectives, some of which conflict with others.

iii. Decide on criteria: measures of performance and cost with which to evaluate alternative policies.

Determining the degree to which a policy meets an objective involves measurement. This step involves identifying consequences of a policy that can be estimated (quantitatively or qualitatively) and that are directly related to the objectives. It also involves identifying the costs (negative benefits) that would be produced by a policy and how they are to be estimated.

iv. Select the alternative policies to be evaluated: This step specifies the policies whose consequences are to be estimated. It is important to include as many as stand any chance of being worthwhile. If a policy is not included in this step, it will never be examined, so there is no way of knowing how good it may be. The current policy should be included as the 'base case' in order to determine how much of an improvement can be expected from the other alternatives.

v. Analyse each alternative: This means determining the consequences that are likely to follow if the alternative is actually implemented, where the consequences are measured in terms of the criteria chosen in Step 3. This step usually involves using a model or models of the system. This step is usually performed for each of several possible future worlds.

vi. Compare the alternatives in terms of projected costs and effects: This step involves examining the estimated costs and effects for each of the scenarios, making tradeoffs among them and choosing a preferred alternative (which is robust against the possible futures). If none of the alternatives examined so far is good enough to be implemented (or if new aspects of the problem have been found, or the analysis has led to new alternatives), return to Step 4.

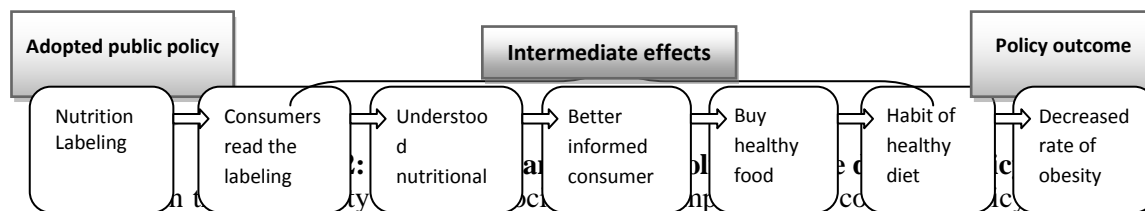
vii. Implement the chosen alternative: This step involves obtaining acceptance of the new procedures (both within and outside the government), training people to use them and performing other tasks to put the policy into effect.

viii. Monitor and evaluate the results: This step is necessary to make sure that the policy is actually accomplishing its intended objectives. If it is not, the policy may have to be modified or a new study performed.

3.4 Dimensions for Analysing Public Policy

There are six analytical dimensions that influence decision-making about public policies: effectiveness, unintended effects, equity, cost, feasibility and acceptability. The first element, effectiveness used to assess

the success of a public policy is its effectiveness at achieving its objective (Salamon 2002). For example, a policy of nutrition labeling is taken to decrease obesity among the people. If the rate of obesity is reduced than the previous record, then it can be said that particular policy is effective (figure 2).



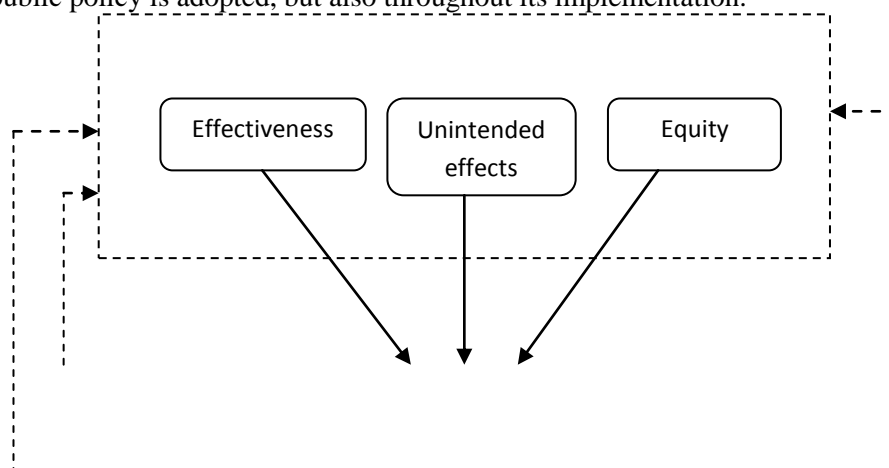
to ensure that it produces only the desired effect, and no other. Unintended effects can be positive or negative (Rychetnik, Frommer, Hawe and Shiell 2002) and can be produced in all kinds of areas: effects on health that are unrelated to the problem targeted, economic, political, or environmental effects, effects on social relations, etc. Nutrition labeling tends to raise awareness and lead consumers to demand healthier food. The food industry is then prompted to modify its products (for example, by reducing their salt content). Such reformulation automatically improves food, even for consumers who do not make use of nutritional information. In contrast, if nutrition labeling leads consumers to reject certain rather unhealthy foods, it can result in revenue losses for their producers and eventually in job losses, if they scale back their activities.

It is very important to take into account equity and not only general effectiveness because, often, for example, public policies improve population health in terms of the overall average, but at the same time deepen social inequalities in health. The aim of this aspect is to determine whether the policy being analyzed produces different effects on various groups (categorized by age, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, residence in certain zones, sexual orientation, disabilities, etc.), or whether it could potentially create, increase or correct inequalities in the distribution of the targeted problem (Tugwell et al. 2010; Oxman, Lavis, Lewin and Fretheim 2009).

When considering financial costs, the cost incurred by government in implementing the policy under study is thought of. Although a policy can generate gains, it can incur costs for other actors (Salamon 2002). For example, for the government, a new tax involves implementation costs, but mainly entails revenues; and for the actors to which it applies (consumers, businesses, etc.), it entails costs. It is important to analyze the distribution over time of costs (one-time or recurring, immediate or deferred costs, short- or long-term investments), as well as their visibility, that is, the degree to which costs are apparent or hidden (Salamon 2002 and Peters 2002). These two factors strongly influence the way stakeholders react to a given policy.

One of the dimensions, feasibility depends on the availability of the required resources, including personnel, material resources and technology (Sabatier and Mazmanian 1995, and Swinburn, Gill and Kumanyika 2005). The quality of the cooperation between the actors involved in implementation has a concrete impact on a policy's feasibility (Salamon 2002 and Swinburn, Gill and Kumanyika 2005).

However, acceptability refers to how the proposed public policy is judged by stakeholders (Swinburn, Gill and Kumanyika 2005). Thus, it focuses on subjective elements (the judgments of actors). In addition, it partly depends on factors that are external to the policy under analysis, because the position of each actor is determined by his or her knowledge, beliefs, values and interests. A policy that does not garner enough support (including the support of public opinion, of those with economic and financial power, etc.) is likely to have difficulty being adopted and implemented, and may thus have difficulty producing the desired effects (Salamon 2002). However, weak acceptability does not necessarily mean the policy should be shelved; socioeconomic, political, and technological changes can bring about changes in acceptability (Sabatier & Mazmanian 1995). Thus, it is important to document its level not only at the time a public policy is adopted, but also throughout its implementation.



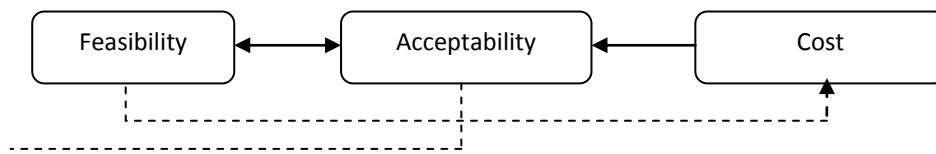


Figure 3: Relationship between six dimensions for analyzing public policy

Figure 3 illustrates that all of the analytical dimensions influence acceptability, because on their assessment of the other dimensions. Inversely, a public policy's degree of acceptability can have a bearing on its feasibility: if certain actors view a policy unfavourably ("Acceptability" dimension), they may decide to take action to impede its implementation ("Feasibility" dimension). Moreover, the more compromised a policy's feasibility, the greater the risk that its implementation will entail additional costs. Finally, feasibility, acceptability and costs collectively influence a public policy's ability to produce results (Morestin 2012).

4. Concluding Remarks

Public policy analysis is the study of government decisions and actions to deal with matters of public concern. Wise analysis is essential for deciding which policies to adopt and then implementing those policies to move the nation toward the public interest. Several conceptual models are often used for policy analysis which is useful in highlighting certain aspects of public policy. For the successful implementation of a public policy the steps are crucial to follow. To examine whether the public policy will be beneficent for all or not it is important to investigate the analytical dimensions of policy analysis. For this reason, the study of public policy analysis is so important, not only for scholars and politicians but also for individuals themselves, so that an informed, educated public can advocate and hold politicians accountable. However, many research opportunities remain within the various steps in the process and in tool development for future.

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