

Public Policy: An Overview of the Concept

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Abstract:

This study aims to understand and familiarise the reader with the concept of public policy. The first section serves as an introduction to the topic by providing an overview of the evolution of the concept of public policy. The second section deals with the main intellectual perspectives that study the concept of public policy, focusing on both Western and Arab perspectives. Finally, a number of conclusions are drawn.

Thus, this research will explore the following points:

Section One: The Evolution of the Concept of Public Policy

Section Two: Intellectual Perspectives on the Concept of Public Policy

Keywords: Concept of Public Policy Article.

Introduction:

The subject of public policy is a crucial one that needs to be well understood in today's realities. It leads us to recognise the formal and informal roles in the policy-making process and helps us to fulfil our duties and claim our rights. Since governments have authority over all members of society, they must establish public policies that address their actions, behaviours and motivations.

The nature and processes of public policy formulation vary from country to country, depending on the political system and the role of governmental and non-governmental agencies. It is a highly dynamic, sensitive and complex process involving many variables, influences and pressures. Their continuous interaction results in a series of reactions that affect all aspects of the functioning of the political system.

Public policies regulate what individuals can and cannot do and how they pursue their desires. They define the relationship between individuals and the government, and serve as the tools with which the government organises the lives of individuals in society. As such, they are the government's instrument for

structuring individual lives, protecting society and the state, and achieving goals in accordance with the prevailing philosophy of governance.

Public policies are the means by which the government translates its philosophy and objectives into practical reality. They serve as the government's tool for organising individual lives, protecting society and the state, and achieving goals in line with the prevailing philosophy of governance.

This brings us to the following question:

What is meant by the concept of public policy and what are the major milestones it has passed through?

Section One: The evolution of the concept of public policy

The concept of public policy is closely linked to the emergence of states and the system of governance based on the role of state institutions in policy implementation, especially after the Second World War when many countries gained independence. This development contributed to the establishment of strategies that successfully implemented government plans, focusing on the role of government in building a civilised society that provides a decent foundation for the lives of individuals. Harold Lasswell is credited with being the first to refer to the concept of public policy in the 1950s¹.

First: Stages in the development of the concept of public policy

The concept of public policy emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s alongside the behavioural revolution. From its inception, it became one of the most important concepts in political science, marking a significant shift from the study of 'power' or 'legitimate authority' to the study of public societal issues and their related needs, demands and problems. At its inception, it was able to address and resolve many political issues, explaining various political phenomena and how different actors influence and interact within the political system.

Public policy has undergone several developments, which can be summarised as follows:

Stage One: (19th-20th centuries)

In the 19th century, public policy was studied as a branch of moral philosophy, limited to descriptive and superficial analysis. As political science developed, it

¹- Madjd Khadr, "The Concept of Public Policy," retrieved from: <https://mawdoo3.com>, accessed on: 15.03.2023.

separated from moral philosophy and, in the 20th century, began to be studied as a branch of the social sciences, including non-political issues. This marked a transition from a narrow understanding of politics to a broader view. At this stage, it cannot be strictly labelled as public policy.

Stage Two: (Between the World Wars)

This period saw a significant developmental milestone in the concept of public policy due to the rise of behavioral political science. The focus shifted to analyzing and understanding political behavior by examining the effects of political, social, and economic forces, as well as evaluating the expected and unexpected results of public policy on society. However, this stage cannot be considered true public policy; it was merely a precursor to its emergence.

Stage Three: (Post-World War II)

Interest in public policy increased significantly after World War II, particularly in third-world countries. This interest stemmed from their national and political independence, prompting efforts to rebuild their economies and improve conditions through comprehensive public policies. Consequently, public policy became a central focus in political science studies and research, marking the beginning of serious interest in addressing the situations these countries faced post-independence.

Stage Four: (21st century)

This phase is characterised by the emergence of the concept of public policy with an empirical intellectual approach, largely due to the efforts of the political economist Harold Lasswell. His pioneering work in the 1950s raised critical questions about the dynamics of politics.

Key features of this period include:

- The association of public policy with political science and the US system of government.
- The association of public policy with the emergence of behavioural schools of thought.
- A reliance on quantitative aspects (surveys, questionnaires).
- The emergence of studies related to the concept of the public sphere (interactions between inputs and outputs).

- The emergence of studies dealing with policy issues related to humanitarian and social issues².

During the 1990s and beyond, due to changes in the role of the state and the demands of the 21st century, together with the increasing influence of multinational corporations and international organisations and the communications revolution, the concept of public policy evolved. It became a common term in public administration literature, with an emphasis on the democratic dimensions of the concept, emphasising participation and civil society engagement. This shift led to a re-evaluation of the traditional view of the state as the primary actor in public policy formulation. Recent trends in public policy-making highlight the important role of international institutions, organisations and UN conferences in prioritising public policy issues on government agendas³.

Second: Reasons for the growing interest in the concept of public policy

The reasons for the growing interest in the concept of public policy can be summarised as follows:

1. Scientific reasons:

The study of public policy allows for a deeper understanding of its origins, processes, roots and the stages through which it has passed, as well as its significance for society. This knowledge enhances our understanding of the political system and society as a whole. Public policy can be seen as an independent or dependent variable, focusing on the political factors and environment that help to shape its conception⁴.

2. Professional reasons:

As our knowledge of the factors that lead to the formulation of public policy and its resulting effects increases, so does our ability to understand what individuals, groups and organisations should do to achieve their public policy goals. This information guides us towards the types of policies needed to achieve our goals,

²- Fahmy Khalifa Al-Fahdawi, *Public Policy: A Holistic Perspective on Structure and Analysis*. Amman: Dar Al-Masira for Publishing and Distribution, 2001, pp. 27-30.

³- Abdul Rahman Al-Anzi, Mohamed Al-Matwaly, *Analyzing Public Policies to Combat Extremism and Terrorism in Kuwait – An Applied Analytical Study from a Legal and Security Political Perspective*. Cairo: Dar Al-Nahda Al-Arabiya, 2008, pp. 9-10.

⁴- James Anderson, *Public Policy Making*, trans. Amer Al-Kubaisi, Jordan: Dar Al-Masira for Publishing and Distribution, 1999, p. 20.

and the social and political forces we can harness to formulate these public policies⁵.

3. Political reasons:

The aim of this study is to emphasise that states adopt the best policies to achieve public goals. Political scientists are often obliged to develop public policy and enrich political discourse by studying government performance in different areas⁶.

Section Two: Intellectual perspectives on the concept of public policy

There are different approaches to the study of public policy because of the different opinions and viewpoints of researchers. However, there is agreement on the common elements that make up public policy and the characteristics that distinguish it from other concepts.

Western definitions of public policy

Among the definitions presented from a Western perspective, the following can be noted:

- Harold Lasswell defines public policy as: “Who gets what, when and how?” through activities related to the distribution of resources, benefits, values and social status influenced by the exercise of power or influence among individuals in society⁷.
- Thomas Dye defines it as: “The decision of government to do or not to do something”⁸.
- Carl Friedrich describes it as: “A proposed course of action for an individual, group, or government within a specific environment, aimed at clarifying targeted opportunities and overcoming constraints to achieve a goal.”⁹
- Guy Peters defines it as: “A specific course of action taken collectively by society or its representatives addressing a particular issue of concern, reflecting the interests of that society or part of it.”¹⁰

⁵- The same reference, p. 21.

⁶- Dandan Abdul Ghani, "Public Policy from Theoretical Experience and Scientific Reality." *Civilized Dialogue*, No. 2588, 2009.

⁷- Fahmy Khalifa Al-Fahdawi, Previous Reference, p. 32.

⁸- Ahmed Mustafa Al-Hussein, *Introduction to Public Policy Analysis*, Jordan: University of Jordan Press, 2002, p. 9.

⁹- Thamer Kamel Mohammed Al-Khazraji, Previous Reference, p. 27.

¹⁰- Kamal Mohammed Al-Mughairebi, *Administration, Environment, and Public Policy*, Amman: Dar Al-Thaqafa, 2001, p. 85.

- Gabriel Almond states that it represents the outcome of a systematic process involving the interaction of inputs (demands + support) and outputs (decisions and policies), reflecting the performance of the political system in terms of its strategic, organizational, symbolic, and responsive capabilities¹¹.

From these definitions we can conclude that, despite the different concepts, public policy has specific characteristics. Our understanding of public policy becomes more complete when we recognise its defining characteristics, which include:

- It is the result of a collective process influenced by ideologies and knowledge frameworks as well as rational and technical methods.

- It is discussed, approved and enacted by officially authorised bodies, although it can also be shaped and developed by many informal participants.

- It addresses issues and problems of public interest and is comprehensive in nature, but it may also focus on issues affecting specific groups that resonate with a wide range of citizens, or it may have strategic and forward-looking objectives that are not of concern to the general public.

- Public policies are characterised by stability, continuity and effectiveness, although some may have a fixed duration, becoming temporary or provisional for a defined period.

- As action projects, public policies are characterised by realism, rationality and feasibility, which makes them measurable and analysable.

- The stability and permanence of public policies does not imply their absolute permanence; changing circumstances may justify their abandonment or modification, requiring the adoption of alternative policies by the same or a higher authority, especially in exceptional circumstances.

- Policies are considered public only if they are consistent with their environment and prevailing beliefs, ethics, values and culture, and meet their demands and aspirations. However, there may still be opposition or disagreement based on political and vested interests, which should ideally be outweighed by the public interest. In other words, most public policies have both winners and losers, or one party benefits greatly while another gains little¹².

¹¹- Gabriel Almond et al., *Comparative Politics: A Theoretical Framework*, trans. Mohamed Zahi Bashir Al-Mughairebi, Benghazi: Qaryunis Publications, 1996, p. 252.

¹²- Hosseini Mohamed Al-Aid, "Public Health Policy in Algeria: An Analytical Study from the Perspective of Modern Institutional Approaches 1990-2012." Master's Thesis, (Qasdi Merbah University, Faculty of Law and Political Science, Department of Political Science, 2012-2013), p. 25.

Second: Arab definitions of the concept of public policy

Arab thinkers have also contributed significantly to defining the concept of public policy. Some notable definitions include

- Najwa Ibrahim Mahmoud defines public policy as: “A means of achieving the goals of the political system, reflecting the balance of active political forces within the system. It is thus linked to the values, ideologies and political goals of the ruling elite, as well as the alternative values and goals of opposition parties or forces”¹³.

- Khayri Abdel Qawi describes it as: “The political and non-political processes and procedures undertaken by the government aimed at reaching a consensus on defining problems, identifying alternatives for solving them, and establishing criteria for comparing them in preparation for selecting the alternative that proposes a binding public policy on the problem at hand.”¹⁴

- Fahmi Khalifa Al-Fahdawi sees public policy as “an active, independent, dynamic and adaptive system that interacts with its environment and related variables. It reflects the responsive activities of official government institutions and their authority within the surrounding social environment, through organised goals, programmes and behaviours that address existing and future issues, while taking into account the necessary means and resources to effectively implement and monitor these policies and ultimately achieve tangible public interest”¹⁵.

- Mansour Ben Larnab suggests that public policy is “an integral part of political management, akin to reason, generosity, decisiveness, constructive planning and foresight for the benefit of all members of the nation. It can be seen as the formulation or engineering of goals and objectives into a specific, purposeful and humanitarian programme, while also emphasising a behavioural analytical approach that anticipates crises and prepares for the future”¹⁶.

- Mohamed Nasr Mahna defines public policy as “the result of the interaction between inputs (such as demands and government support) and outputs (such as decisions regarding public interests), which aims to reflect the performance of the political system in various domains (strategic, organisational, distributive,

¹³- Nadjwa Ibrahim Mahmoud, "The Concept of Public Policy," Democracy Magazine, No. 1, 2001, p. 12.

¹⁴- Khairy Abdul Qawi, Study of Public Policy, Kuwait: Dar Al-Salasil, 1989, p. 97.

¹⁵- Fahmy Khalifa Al-Fahdawi, Previous Reference, p. 38.

¹⁶- Mansour Ben Larnab, "Lectures on the System of Governance in Islam for Graduate Students," University of Algeria, Faculty of Political Science and Media, 2000, p. 120.

symbolic and international response) through the decisions and policies implemented”¹⁷.

From these definitions, we can deduce that public policy is a set of solutions and decisions resulting from the interaction between the formal institutions of the political system and informal entities (such as political parties, interest groups, the private sector, the media, etc.). These are formulated into targeted policy programmes aimed at addressing various governmental issues¹⁸.

Thus, public policy can be understood as a government programme aimed at addressing or resolving societal issues that attract public attention.

Moreover, regardless of its various definitions, public policy consists of specific elements¹⁹. A clearer understanding of the term can be achieved by breaking it down into its basic components, which include public policy demands, decisions, statements, outputs and returns. These elements do not necessarily appear in the same order in practice. A brief overview of these elements is provided below:

A. Political demands

These include all requests made to officials by various stakeholders, whether from the public or from active officials within the political system. Such demands are intended to prompt action on a particular issue or to halt progress in a particular direction. Public demands create the need to draw attention to public policies and serve as a starting point for studying their formulation.

B. Public policy decisions

These include the actions of decision-makers and public officials who are empowered to issue royal decrees, resolutions, orders and directives that guide government action. Public policy decisions are distinct from routine administrative decisions²⁰.

C. Official speeches and statements

These are formal expressions or statements that suggest a public policy and articulate the government’s position on a particular issue.

¹⁷- Nadia Bounoua, Previous Reference, p. 48.

¹⁸- Thamer Kamel Mohammed Al-Khazraji, *Modern Political Systems and Public Policies: A Contemporary Study in Power Management Strategy*. Amman: Dar Majdalawi for Publishing and Distribution, 2004, p. 28.

¹⁹- Hisham Zaghshu, "Public Policy Making from the Perspective of Power Distribution and Its Relationship with Public Opinion in Open Systems." *Humanities Research and Studies Journal*, No. 10, 2015, p. 80.

²⁰- Thamer Kamel Mohammed Al-Khazraji, Previous Reference. p. 29.

D. Public policy outputs

These reflect the tangible results of public policy decisions and statements as perceived by citizens through government action.

H. Returns and effects of policy

Every public policy implemented has specific effects, which can be either positive or negative²¹.

Conclusion

From the above, we conclude that public policy takes the form of a practical programme managed by the official public authority or government and various administrative centres. It consists of a set of clear, specific, comprehensive and balanced measures, coupled with legally binding decision-making elements, approved by government actors within the existing environment and society. This framework enables public policy to encompass actions, events and public issues, as it is directed towards the beneficiaries or those subject to it within its scope.

Public policy is influenced by many active forces in the political environment that drive the formation of balanced alliances to protect selective interests or manifest themselves as conflicts that place public policy at a crossroads or in a state of disequilibrium. These conflicts need to be resolved using scientific and practical tools and methods that unify perspectives and harmonise interests. The success of any public policy in achieving its objectives depends fundamentally on mobilising the support of legislators, government leaders and central office managers to transform public policy into a state of achievement, action and implementation.

Ultimately, public policy, as a purposeful programme, represents a vital and effective response to environmental problems and changes, reflecting the activities of official government institutions while working with other social forces to achieve the public interest.

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