



## **Challenges of implementation of health policies in Nigeria: The way forward**

**Nwankwo, Franklin Chibuikwe**

Department of Sociology  
Madonna University Nigeria, Okija Campus  
Email: franklinnwankwo20@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*The role of plans of action, strategies or guidelines set up by government to ensure steady provision of health and social services cannot be overemphasized. Such plans of action, health or social policy are intended to address social problems and provide affordable social services and amenities to the population. Nigeria has several well articulated health policies like the national health policy, national blood transfusion policy, national health promotion policy and national malaria control policy, among others. However, the implementation and accomplishments of the policies have encountered challenges over the years. This review paper examines the relevance and problems facing implementation of health policies in Nigeria. The paper recommended among others that people should be well sensitized on policy thrusts; and that government should set up monitoring teams for implementation of policies as well as, ensure that policy initiatives are adequately funded.*

**Keywords:** *health, health policy, social policy, health promotion, social services*

### **Introduction**

Governments of Nation States across the world usually strive to provide their citizens with the best conditions of social welfare, social protection and improved economic situations. They also work to ensure that living environment of citizens are conducive, such that they have access to social services such as quality housing(shelter) , food, water , health services, good roads, education, electricity, security, employment and reasonable income for upkeep etc.

In view of the importance of the above listed social services, governments usually set up plans of action, strategies or guidelines to ensure steady provision of those services. Such plans of action are referred to as Social Policy. Generally, social policies are intended to address social problems and provide affordable social services/ amenities.

The field of social policy is not a discipline of its own, but a subject area that cut across several disciplines such as law, sociology, psychology, political science etc.



### **Conceptualization of Key Terms**

**Social/Public Policy:** According to Colleen, Shawn and Sasha (2022), public policy refers specifically to the laws and regulations that are created by the government itself, in response to perceived societal issues. Examples of issues addressed by public policy include public health, criminal justice, gun rights, immigration, reproductive rights, drug use, education, and disaster preparedness, among others. All levels of government (municipal, state, and federal) make public policy decisions to promote and protect the health of the population.

According to Colleen, Shawn and Sasha (2022), Public Policy can be classified into two: Domestic policy and Foreign policy. Domestic policy refers to actions taken by the federal government to address issues within the nation's borders. Foreign policy on the other hand, refers to actions taken by the federal government with the goal of solving issues outside of the nation's borders.

**Health Promotion:** Health Promotion is defined in the Ottawa Charter (1986) as the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve their health. It moves beyond a focus on individual behavior towards a wide range of social and environmental interventions (WHO). There is growing evidence globally that Health Promotion is a pre-requisite for economic development because health promotion interventions make positive contribution to the improvement of human health.

It is a cost-effective approach which facilitates increased individual, family, community and social participation in health. It promotes well being through the adoption of positive lifestyles by all, as well as disease prevention. It increases the use of available health services by combining approaches of equity, multi-sectoral collaboration, partnerships, alliances and networks.

Health Promotion offers practical approaches to ensuring equal access to health through promotion of lawful, financial, economic and targeted environmental interventions. Hence, Health Promotion promotes high quality of life, healthy productive population with reduced morbidity, mortality and expenditure on health leading to resultant benefit of a prolonged lifespan.



The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) recognizes Health Promotion as an essential component to achieving the highest level of health and development of individuals, families, households and communities across Nigeria. Health Promotion interventions will be adequately resourced and deployed to effectively address the increasing burden of diseases, other public health challenges and social determinants of health.

**Public Health Policy** focuses on the health of the population and includes efforts to promote and protect the health of the population. Federal programs providing health care include Medicare and Medicaid. Public health also involves implementing and enforcing regulations protecting the public, such as food and drug regulations.

According to Regis College (2021), health policy and management involves not only the public health policies that officials and governing bodies introduce to improve the health of the population, but also the policies that health care institutions use to standardize their delivery and cost of care services. The purpose of many health policies is to help ensure that the public has access to health care and other resources, and can use them to support their longevity and quality of life.

The World Health Organization (WHO) explained that health policy can include the actions undertaken by governing bodies and health institution managers, as well as the conditions, decisions, and plans that lead to these actions as well, and which support a particular health subject.

According to Alexandra (2022), Health policy consists of the principles and regulations that guide and promote people's health and well-being. Health policies are created to influence health achievements and goals.

According to Ballotpedia (2015), healthcare policy involves the creation and implementation of laws, rules, and regulations for managing nation's healthcare system. The healthcare system consists of services provided by medical professionals to diagnose, treat, and prevent mental and physical illness and injury. The system also encompasses a wide range of related sectors, such as insurance, pharmaceuticals and health information technology



### **Types/Classification of Health Policies**

According to Alexandra (2022), Health Policy can be classified into two :

1. Regulatory Health Policy
2. Allocative Health Policy

**Regulatory Health Policies** are used by the government to standardize and control types of behavior of specific groups. The government does this by monitoring and enforcing consequences when policies are not followed. An example of a public regulatory health policy is requiring medical professionals to be licensed in order to work. Another example of a private regulatory health policy is the accreditation process that hospitals follow through various organizations to ensure standards are being met.

**Allocative Health Policies** are driven by income, services, or goods that benefit one group or organization over another. There are two types of allocative health policies.

- a) Distributive policies target the society as a whole to provide benefits. An example of distributive policy is the funding of medical research coming from the government to work on improving health services.
- b) Redistributive policies take money or power away from one group and give to another group. For example, a redistributive policy taxes one group of people to give to another, such as when wealthier people are taxed and their money is used by Medicaid to provide affordable health insurance to poorer people.

### **Relevance /Importance of Health Policies**

According to Regis College (2021), public health policy and management is important for these key reasons:

1. Within health care facilities, policies ensure that the practices of staff members align with current laws and industry regulations. This helps standardize the level of care provided at institutions across the country and the world.
2. Policies put in place by health care administrators in hospitals and other facilities also help guide and direct the cost and delivery of health care services. This



guidance of cost and services also supports availability for the public, and helps prevent barriers to health care accessibility.

3. For the public, policies can help in numerous different ways, including helping prevent the spread of infections or diseases, provide education for healthier choices and practices, ensure health safety, and improve the overall quality of life for the public.

According to University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences (2021) , Healthcare policy is important because:

1. It helps establish guidelines that benefit patients, healthcare organizations, and our healthcare system. Having protocols in place can help prevent human error and poor communication around medical decisions.

According to World Health Organization, an explicit health policy can achieve several things:

1. It defines a vision for the future, which in turn helps to establish targets and points of reference for the short and medium term.
2. It outlines priorities and the expected roles of different groups.
3. It builds consensus and informs people.

### **Overview of the National Health Promotion Policy in Nigeria**

**Background:** Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with an estimated population of over 198 million in 2018. The population of Nigeria was estimated to have grown to 210 million as at 2021 based on a growth rate of 3.2% (National Population Commission, 2018). Nigeria is a federation of 36 states and a Federal Capital Territory, Abuja as the national capital. There are 774 Local Government Areas (LGAs) distributed across 6 geopolitical zones. The Nigerian 1999 Constitution (as amended) guarantees the right to health of all Nigerians.

The National Health Policy (NHP, 2016) provides the compass for the country's health system; while the National Health Act (2014) provides a framework for the regulation, development and management of the health system as well as set standards for rendering health services in the federation (NSHDP II 2018).



The Nigerian Government developed the National Health Promotion Policy (NHPP) in 2006 to strengthen the health promotion capacity of the National Health System to deliver health care that is promotive, protective, preventive, restorative and rehabilitative to every citizen of the country. The policy has been in operation since then.

However, the implementation of the NHPP (2006) was affected by some challenges such as weak intersectoral collaboration, weak management structures, poor infrastructure, and limited understanding of the concept of health promotion and consumer rights at all levels. These gaps, current trends in Health Promotion practices as well as emerging and re-emerging health issues of public health importance informed the revision of the 2006 edition and resulted in the NHPP 2019.

The National Health Policy (NHP) 2006 recognizes that Nigeria is saddled with an unbearable burden of Communicable and Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs). This is coupled with issues such as low levels of health literacy, poor sanitation and inadequate attention to key social determinants of health. The revised National Health Promotion Policy (NHPP, 2019) is meant to contribute to achieving Nigeria's National Health Policy commitment; to deliver health care that is preventive, promotive, protective, restorative and rehabilitative to every citizen of the country.

### **Goals and Objectives of Nigeria's National Health Promotion Policy**

**Goals:** To empower the Nigerian populace to take timely actions in disease prevention, improving their health and wellbeing as well as taking measures that ensure a healthy society.

**Broad Objectives:** National Health Promotion Policy has three broad objectives as follows:

1. Foster health promotion interventions targeted at addressing social determinants of health, reducing inequities, and tackling priority burden of diseases in Nigeria
2. Facilitate health promotion interventions in support of Government's efforts directed at ensuring and sustaining healthy behaviour, healthy lifestyle, and enabling environment including healthy public policy.
3. Enhance human resource and capacity strengthening for the delivery of health promotion interventions.



4. Strengthen systems to monitor, evaluate and manage evidence related to health promotion interventions.

### **Principles and Values that Underlie Nigeria's National Health Promotion Policy**

The National Health Promotion Policy (2019) is underpinned by the following principles and values:

1. **Government Accountability and Responsibility:** All levels of government have a responsibility and are accountable for protecting, maintaining and improving the health of its citizens; as health is a global public good. The pursuance of this responsibility comes with the need to mainstream Health Promotion as a major component of efforts aimed at the delivery of social services, development and environmental sustainability.

2. **Equality, Equity and Social Inclusion:** People have a right to equal opportunities and to good health and well-being. Interventions must take cognizance of generic, cross-cutting as well as the special needs of the under reached and vulnerable members of the population; regardless of socio-economic status, gender, religion, ethnicity, literacy, race and location. Consequently, approaches determined by issues, population and settings must be carefully thought through, balanced and appropriately applied.

3. **Ethics:** All interventions will endeavour to engender respect, justice and fairness for persons or beneficiaries, end users and their rights.

4. **Professionalism:** Nigerians deserve the best that government and other entities, including professionals and service providers can offer. The outputs of Health Promotion interventions must aim at gold standards and best practices. Quality Assurance, Monitoring and Evaluation will ensure optimal outcomes.

6. **Efficiency:** The design and implementation of interventions must aim at maximizing value for all the resources invested. Assigned responsibilities and roles must be delivered at the appropriate levels and by qualified persons. Actions must be driven by evidence, innovation, quality and results.

7. **Regulation and Legislation:** Health Education, Sensitization, Communication, Community Mobilization and Advocacy are undoubtedly effective in their own rights as strategies for



influencing human behaviour. Hence, health promotion interventions shall be regulated and legislated to ensure achievement of Health Promotion outcomes.

**8. Community Ownership:** The role of individuals, families and communities are fundamental for preventing diseases, improving health and wellbeing as well as ensuring a healthy society. As communities are dynamic and differ, improving health literacy will be targeted based on the needs of entities, target groups and communities. Efforts shall be geared towards progressing from participation to ownership and sustainability.

**9. Multi-dimensional Collaboration:** This Policy recognizes the invaluable positive roles and immense contributions of the community, the Private Sector, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), International Organizations and all other Donor Agencies in disease prevention, improving health and wellbeing as well as taking measures that ensure a healthy society.

### **Factors Affecting the Implementation of Health Policies in Nigeria**

According to Nwankwo (2023), There are some challenges facing social and health policy implementation in Nigeria. These include the following:

1. **Corruption and Misuse of Funds:** Corruption and misuse of funds is one of the problems facing successful implementation of social policy in Nigeria. People who are in charge of those social policies tend to use fund meant for social policies for their personal use.
2. **Unavailability of Fund:** Lack of fund for successful implementation because of the budget may be small or poorly managed. The reason is why social policy are dropped or set side.
3. **Community Participation and Public Enlightenment:** Some Policies lack community participation due to problem of enlightenment. community are not told about the social policy
4. **Change of Policy by government:** Change in government and frequent interruption of social policy thrusts, especially in Nigeria. Policies adopted by the previous administration are usually dropped by new government.





5. **Culture:** Social Policies that are in conflict with the culture and traditions of the people usually encounter extreme challenges and could fail do to lack of community support.
6. **Lack of Trained Personnel:** There is no trained personnel made for the implementation of the policy. Even those who are available but they are not trained to understand the meaning and context of policy.

### **The Way Forward**

1. There should persons (monitors) who act as supervisors in order to ensure that the money set aside for policy implementation are duly put into use and properly managed.
2. Government should provide adequate fund to ensure policy implementation are done smoothly.
3. There should be public enlightenment about the policy so that members of the public understand what the policy is all about and also participate actively.
4. There should not be frequent policy breaks arising from changes in government. This can help people to internalize policy goals and work to achieve its major objectives.
5. Policy should be made in line with people's culture in order to ensure that its objectives synchronize with their aspirations.
6. There should be adequate training for personnel involved in policy implementation for them to understand the goals and objectives of a policy.

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