

Policy Making and Information Dissemination in Nigeria: Challenges and the Way Forward

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of Policy Making particularly as it relates to information dissemination in Nigeria. It notes the various ways to policymaking and the various stages and processes to its actualization. The paper further notes roles of the citizen in the formulation of a good policy and the need for their participation in jointly building towards a healthy society through the creation of a peaceful and robust economy aimed at the provision of better living standards in Nigeria. It highlights the challenges to policy making and proffers solutions towards a credible policymaking and Implementation strategy in the creation of a peaceful society in Nigeria.

Key Words - Policy Making, Government Information, Corruption, Sustainable Development.

Introduction

Nigeria is overwhelmed by many problems, particularly in the area of politics, commerce, education, agriculture, communication, housing, transportation, health and other contemporary issues such as terrorism, unemployment, kidnapping. It is in recognition of these problems and in a bid to proffer durable and reliable solutions to them that government formulates policies to help eradicate these problems and improve the standard of living of the people. This is essential because if attempts are not made to address these problems as they arise, they may degenerate into uncontrollable stages with the society's socio-economic growth and development endangered (Okoli & Onah, 2002). Accordingly, Government commits much time, energy and resources to the development of policies. Some even take years to make, but once made, they become the regulatory instrument and/or the big guiding stick in related areas of activity.

Policy Defined

The term policy is central to the operation and activities of both private organizations and public institutions. A policy option made by an individual or private institution is known as private policy while the one made by government or its institutions is called public policy (Ozor, 2004). Policy is a familiar concept used on a daily basis by virtually everybody; but owing to the diversity of circumstances in which the term is applied, coupled with the fact that human beings by nature vary in their perceptions, there is a variety of meanings attached to the concept. However, the New Oxford Dictionary, define policy as: "a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by a government, party, business or individual" while Policy-

making has been defined as the process by which governments translate their political vision into programmes and actions to deliver 'outcomes' - desired change in the real world.

The success of any political system lies in its policy making and implementation process. Policy as an instrument of government affects the lives of each person. It involves a central position in the success of every administration, whether public, private or not-for-profit making organization. Policy is a statement of principle or groups of principles, with their supporting rules of action that condition and governs the accomplishment of certain target to which a business is aimed. Ikelegbe (2006) also defined policy as a course of action or a programme of actions, which is selected from among several options by certain actors in response to certain problems.

Policy process comprises of six key perspectives, policy generation, formulation, policy output, implementation, performance and impact, which are considered as policy generation, formulation and implementation. The process of policy making from the generation stage comprises of environment, where the problem is generated (ibid). Policy formulation involves different institutions; the ability of policy makers to address social problem dwells in the interest of different institutions to formulate policies aimed towards significant development. The interest of policy makers as well affects the implementation of any policy. The method and approaches used as a part of the implementation of a policy direct the effective or ineffective implementation of the policy by the implementing agency.

There are different approaches for the formulation and implementation of policies. The prescriptive approach, which gives information where alternatives and options are achieved in policy, formulation, prescribes future outcomes. The descriptive approach describes public policy; it concentrates on the account of making development, causes, implementation, consequences and problem of public policy (ibid). Micro approach concentrates on the study of particular public policy and policy problem. Macro approach aids in the development of knowledge and comprehension of problem policy processes. The dependent and, independent variables approach, the Qualitative and quantitative method, regardless of the above-mentioned approaches used are part of policy formulation meant to address social problems. Government has thus not been able to adopt the right method and approach to address the main causes of the crisis.

Policy Making Process

Policies are enacted to regulate industry and business, to protect citizens at home and abroad, to aid state and city governments and people such as the poor through funding programs, and to encourage social goals. A policy established and carried out by the government goes through several stages from inception to conclusion. These are agenda building, formulation, adoption, implementation, evaluation, and termination. Each policy begins with the identification of a societal problem and its placement on the policy agenda. Subsequently, policy proposals are formulated, from which one will be adopted. In the next stage, the adopted policy is taken to action. Finally, the impacts of the policy are evaluated.

Agenda Building

The first stage in policymaking refers to the identification of a public problem, which requires the state to intervene. There are many problems, but only a small number will be

given official attention by legislators and executives. Those public problems that are chosen by the decisions makers constitute the policy agenda. Cobb & Elder (1972) distinguish between the systemic agenda and the institutional agenda. The systemic agenda refers to all societal problems that demand public attention, hence forming the ‘discussion agenda’. The institutional agenda, by contrast, contains a set of problems that are up for the serious consideration of decision makers.

According to (Shepsle & Weingast 1987), the institutional agenda is the ‘action agenda’, which is more specific and concrete than the systemic agenda. Setting the agenda is an important source of power as it is policy consequential, i.e. legislative institutions grant an advantage to the first movers as compared to the second movers. Four types of actors set the policy agenda: (1) public officials, (2) the bureaucracy, (3) the mass media, and (4) the interest groups (Gerston, 2004).

Elected Public officials, e.g. the President, Parliament, Ministries and Courts, are the most obvious agenda builders since their position enables them not only to make policies, but also to place certain issues on the agenda. There is a virtual consensus that bureaucracies have an impact on policy making at both the planning and implementation stage. However, recent studies have shown that bureaucrats also have the ability to affect the organization of the political agenda (Hammond 1986). Schnapp (2000) demonstrates that bureaucracies can stand in as effective agenda setters under clearly identified circumstances, i.e. if no political actors put forward a proposal on a certain problem, and therefore chances exist for the bureaucracy to increase its utility by advancing a policy proposal.

Agenda setting is also frequently associated with the role of mass media; however, not all media topics are placed on the policy agenda, which highlights that a public discussion of a more or less relevant societal problem must not necessarily become a political problem (McCombs and Shaw 1972; McCombs 2004).

Policy Formulation

Policy formulation means coming up with an approach to solving a problem, which involves the definition, discussion, acceptance, or rejection of feasible courses of action for coping with policy problems. Policy formulation occurs in government bureaucracies; interest group offices; legislative committee rooms, meetings of special commissions; and policy-planning organizations otherwise known as “think tanks”. Hall (1993) states that policy formulation implies the definition of policy objectives and the selection of the most appropriate policy instruments as well as their settings. It takes place within the broader context of technical and political constraints of state action. Policy formulation brings the relationship between executives and legislatures into the forefront (Fabbrini & Donà, 2003).

However, policy formulation can rather be conceived as a more or less informal process of negotiation between ministerial departments and interest groups (Jann & Wegrich, 2006). Interest groups play a major role in policy formulation as they often work with executive and legislative officials to develop a policy draft. Interest groups may play a big part in formulating legislation about complex and technical issues, and when government institutions lack time and staff to cope with such matters (Anderson 2003).

Policy Adoption

Government institutions determine the final adoption of a particular policy alternative. A number of factors determine the adoption of a policy option. Of these, two sets of factors are of major relevance. The set of feasible policies can be reduced by the necessity to build majorities for the approval of a policy option, which implies considerations about values, party affiliation, constituency interests, public opinion, deference, and decision rules (ibid). According to Bowler et al. 1999; Benedetto & Hix, 2007, Party loyalty is an important decision-making criterion for most members of parliament. Therefore, party affiliation is an important indicator for the likelihood of a member of parliament to approve a policy draft.

According to a comparative study by Bräuninger and Debus (2007), a parliamentary majority adopts a small but significant share of law proposals initiated by bipartisan or even opposition parties. This finding somewhat contradicts the branch of research that argues that the government is the sole and decisive actor in policymaking (Döring, 1995, 2001; Döring & Hallerberg, 2004). Generally, a member of parliament is expected to adopt a policy option, if the benefits for the constituency prevail. Further, considerations about the public opinion also affect policy choices as well as decision rules, values and perception. However, policy adoption should be dominated by bargaining and compromise and, therefore, the most plausible decision-making theory appear to be incrementalism rather than rational models (Hayes 2001).

In analyzing this aspect of the policy-making process, Tsebelis's (1995, 2000, 2002) concept of 'veto players' is particularly useful. In presidential systems, 'divided government' can impede decision-making, as there are generally insufficient incentives for political parties to cooperate and build policy-making coalitions. But also other states are prone to his kind of constraint.

Policy Implementation

Implementation represents the conversion of new laws and programs into practice. Without proper implementation, policy has neither substance nor significance. Thus, policy success depends on how well bureaucratic structures implement government decisions (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Hill and Hupe 2005). Various theoretical approaches were elaborated to the study of implementation, which Pülzl and Treib (2006), divide into three categories (ibid)

Top-down models primarily emphasize the ability of policy makers to produce unequivocal policy objectives and control the implementation process (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Bardach 1977; Mazmanian and Sabatier 1983). Bottom-up models regard local bureaucrats as the central actors in policy delivery and view implementation as negotiation processes within networks (Lipsky 1971, 1980). Hybrid models integrate elements of both previously mentioned models and other theoretical models ((Mayntz 1977; Windhoff-Héritier 1980).

For an implementation to be successful there must be an entity with sufficient resources, which is able to translate the policy objectives into an operational framework and that is accountable for its actions (Ibid). When implementing regulatory policies, most agencies are responsive to the communities over which they preside, while distributive policies are implemented with some bureaucratic discretion, with congressional

subcommittees and organized interest groups exercising continuous oversight. The very design of a policy seems to be of relevance for implementation success but it is not only the policy design and the instrument choice that determines the likelihood of proper implementation.

In federal systems, for instance, implementation efforts may move between the levels of government as well as within levels of government (ibid). If implementation is a matter of horizontal implementation, in which a national legal act must be applied solely by an agency in the executive branch, the number of actors remains low and implementation can be attained smoothly. But if vertical implementation is concerned, implying that various segment of the national government must interact with different levels at the sub-national level, the undertaking may become challenging.

The relevance of bureaucracy during the implementation phase reveals a contradictory picture of great interest. On the one hand, bureaucracies are essential for making policies work. On the other hand, senior bureaucrats are often more experienced and better trained than their political masters which paves the way for 'bureaucratic drift' (Newton & van Deth, 2005). Schnapp (2001) also reveals that the possibility of a bureaucratic drift is likely in countries with coalition government that have a high number of coalition parties.

Evaluation

After a policy is passed by the legislature and implemented by the bureaucracy, it becomes a subject of evaluation. The main question at this stage is whether the output of the decision-making process has attained the intended goals. Evaluation is often a formal component of policymaking and is generally carried out by experts who have some knowledge about the processes and objectives pertaining to the issue undergoing review (ibid).

Policy evaluation provides a feedback loop, which enables decision makers to draw lessons from each particular policy in operation. This feedback loop identifies new problems and sets in motion the policy making process once again, creating an endless policy cycle. This turns policy evaluation into a powerful tool of the policy making process: it possesses the potential to reframe an issue once thought to be resolved by policy makers and can also lead to the termination of public policies (Sanderson 2002).

According to Rossi et al. (2004), the systematic evaluation of a policy or more specifically of a program comprises of five areas, namely:

- a. The need for a particular problem,
- b. The program's design,
- c. Its implementation,
- d. Its impact or outcomes, and
- e. Its efficiency (ibid).

These domains are mainly dealt with in scientific evaluation, which must be distinguished between administrative evaluations conducted or initiated by the public administration and political evaluation carried out by diverse actors in the political arena, including the public and the media (Howlett & Ramesh 2003).

In practice, policy evaluation presents numerous challenges to the evaluators. Citizens and governments alike tend to interpret the actual effects of a policy in a way that it serves their own intentions (ibid). However, evaluators can be confronted with more general problems: 'Program circumstances and activities may change during the course of an evaluation, an appropriate balance must be found between scientific and pragmatic considerations in the evaluation design, and the wide diversity of perspectives and approaches in the evaluation field provide little firm guidance about how best to proceed with an evaluation' (ibid).

The results of the evaluation procedure can also lead to the termination of a certain policy. In theoretical terms, policy termination should be likely when a policy problem has been solved, or if evaluation studies reveal the dysfunctionality of a policy. Nonetheless, the empirical findings show that once a policy is institutionalized within a government, it is hard to terminate it (Bardach 1976, Jann & Wegrich 2006). Thus, termination should become more likely if a government experiences some kind of shock, justifying drastic measures, such as economic crises (Geva-May 2004).

The Nature of Policy Making in Nigeria

The dominant feature of policymaking process in Nigeria is the principle of Federal Supremacy, which is a constitutional conditionality in Nigeria. Under the constitution, the Federal Government is expected to provide the overall direction and leadership in the planning process from the formulation stage through the implementation and evaluation stages. The decision-making under the federal supremacy principles requires the National Economic Council, which is led by the vice President, to advise the President concerning the economic affairs of the federation, and, in particular, on measures necessary for the co-ordination of economic planning efforts or the economic development programs of various states government in Nigeria.

The Institutions that are involved at the early stage include the ministries of Finance and National Planning. Policy inputs come from the various ministries and departments of ministry of National Planning in the National planning office. Here policy alternatives are examined and evaluated and then translated into programs within the financial parameters stated by the ministry of Finance.

Policymaking and implementation has been classified as the instrument of every political system used to address fundamental issues. Obikezie and Obi (2004), consider policy to be "controlling rule towards the understanding of objective". The Nigerian System of Policy making is characterized by factors, for example, ethnicity, corruption, lack of consistency in government approaches, insufficient human and material assets, all of which frequently prompt policies failures. The Policy making formulation System comprises of policy making structures and collaboration".

The policy making scene include policy makers that make up the legislative body, the executive, judiciary and bureaucracy officials of the ruling political parties, whose major aim ought to be to formulate policies that will address social problems (Ibid). Nigeria's poor socio-economic condition since the achievement of political independence from 1960 till date has been attributed to poor policy formulation and its inadequacy in policy implementation. Policy failure has worsened the living condition of the citizens, and has also stagnated the

development process. Government has failed to address the crisis that has engulfed the whole political process since independence this exposes government's lack of will-power and ability to deal with problems squarely. Below are some examples of some major policies in Nigeria:

The National Policy on Education formulated in 1977 to achieve the objective of acquiring appropriate skills and competence, both mental and physical, as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of the Nigerian society (National Policy on Education, 1977). The National Population Policy of 1988 which basic objective is to provide Nigerians with necessary information and education on the value of reasonable family size to both the individual family and the future of the nation in achieving self-reliance (Okoli & Onah 2002).

The National Housing Policy of 1991 which major objective is to address the housing needs of Nigerians by achieving significant increase in supply of housing so as to bring relief especially to the public or civil servants (Okoli & Onah, 2002). The Poverty Alleviation Policy of Olusegun Obasanjo's government, which has, as its basic objective the reduction of poverty through the provision of welfare packages to the poor and the unemployed in Nigeria (Ozor, 2004).

Why Policies Fail in Nigeria

It has been observed that despite the lofty and painstaking policies usually formulated in Nigeria, little or no tangible outcomes have been achieved as they always tend to fall by the wayside. This is because the critical elements in both the internal and external environments and the implementation process account for the gap between goals and achievements. Nigeria has never lacked in planning, but the problem has always been achieving results. The Late Indian Prime Minister, Pandhit Nehru lamented on similar situation in India saying, *"We in the planning commission and others concerned have grown more experts in planning, but the real question is not planning but implementing the plans. That is the real questions before the country. I fear we are quite as expert at implementation as in planning"* (Eminue, 2005).

A lot of factors account for the implementation problems in Nigeria; they include **Inadequate Data:** Policy planning relies basically on data. Accurate data is a very scarce commodity in Nigeria and the success of any policy depends on the reliability of underlying data. Nigeria lacks the culture of record keeping and information gathering. Most planning ministries or agencies work without data even when one is available, most of the time is unreliable and defective. The most vivid illustration of the problem of data in Nigeria is the fact that since independence till date, nobody has been able to answer the simple question.

"How many are we? A country that does not know its population would definitely not be in a position to determine the other vital statistics necessary for planning like birth rate, death-rate, number of school age and other demographic changes in the population, which are essential for planning. In Nigeria, a comprehensive national database is lacking and conflicting statistics abound, as a result of the lack of collaboration and coordination between various federal agencies involved in data collection. In such circumstance, the planning exercise will be reduced to a mere guesswork.

Over Ambitious Policy Goals: Nigeria tends to indulge in over ambitious policies either owing to the desire to establish support base and legitimacy for government to bring

about economic development or to serve ideological ends. Such policies cannot work as they will lack adequate financial, manpower, technical resources, institutional and organizational capabilities and the necessary political will for implementing such fundamental policies (ibid).

Policy Instability: Regimes and policies change rapidly in Nigeria. Each regime usually comes with its own policy. Leaders tend to throw overboard the policy of their predecessors-in-office. Policy instability in Nigeria adversely affects policy implementation. It is observed that erratic policies are dysfunctional to growth while policy stability tends to promote and engender planning as well as proper and effective implementation. There must be continuity for stability to take effect (ibid).

Compromise and Conflict during Implementation: In Nigeria most of the times compromise that seek to alter basic policy goals are made during implementation, which is detrimental to successful execution of programmes. Most of the times, policies are determined on the basis of political loyalty. In some cases, they are used for political handshake. In Nigeria, no matter how sound a policy is, it cannot be implemented in a political vacuum. It is most pathetic that in the Nigerian situation, policies that see the light of the day are policies that favor the insignificant few that govern. Any policy that is geared towards supporting the improved standard of living of the majority.

Corruption: It must be noted that corruption goes with power and therefore, must be located first within the ranks of the powerful (Egonmwan, 1991). Since independence, corruption has been a major source of cost escalation of government projects. Government contracts in Nigeria have always been a conduit pipe for making fast and easy money by government officials and contractors through dubious means. Transparent processes are never followed in the award of multi-million-naira contracts.

Lack of mass commitment: Development plans are often prepared without consulting the people, hence the public apathy towards its implementation. Since the plans are meant for the people, who are not even aware of its existence or objectives they do not feel duty bound to contribute to its success. This has been a big problem that has contributed to the failure of plans in Nigeria. Perhaps it was in order to solve this problem that made the defunct vision 2010 committee to embark on series of publicity programs like seminars, conferences and public enlightenment campaigns.

Implications of Policy Failures

Alienation: The citizens feel that they are not part of the society as they feel ostracized by the leadership and government. This is because most of the policies, especially the poverty alleviation policies, that would have given the poor, low-income group and the average citizens, a sense of belonging failed and when they were sparsely implemented the policies never benefited many citizens. Hence, they do not have sense of belonging in their own country and may ultimately, become unpatriotic.

Waste of Resources: Public policy failures are waste of human and material resources that were put into it during and after formulation. The entire process of public policy is no mean task. If the policies fail to achieve its desired results, then the colossal resources in both human and financial resources put into it from formulation to the

implementation stages are wasted, as resources could have been devoted to other areas, which need more attention in the country.

Lack of Patriotism by Citizens: Public policy failure can bring about less patriotism by citizens of a country. Many Nigerians have suffered from public policy failures, which have resulted in the non-improvement of their lives and wellbeing.

Policy and Information Dissemination

Information can affect the success of policy implementation, as the implementation actors need to know the clarity of the policy and how to transmit it to the target group. Information is the main condition for implementing the policy, where the policy implementers need to know what they should be doing and policy decisions should be channeled to the right people, the information should also be exact, so that if the policy will be applied, it can be clear and consistent (Edwards II; 1980). So information is needed in order for government policies to be conveyed to the public. Therefore, information, dissemination is a form of communication to convey a message from the government to the public.

In view of the importance of information to the public, the dissemination of information needs to be designed. Dissemination of information is intended not only to inform, but also is a form of conveying government's performance level as well as a means of instilling the spirit of participation on the community. It therefore behooves on government to devise a policy for information dissemination capable of touching all levels of society, towards achieving sustainable development (John M Echols and Hassan Shadily, 1979).

Conclusion

Public policies are powerful developmental instruments in the hands of government. The reverse should not be the case for Nigeria because of its diversity, and huge public structure. Therefore, urgent steps in line with the above recommendations should be taken to enhance public policy practice in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The challenges facing the Nigerian public policy practice with regards to formulation and implementation are one that needs to be tackled for the benefit of the Nigerian State. In order to stem the failure of public policies in Nigeria, the following recommendations may suffice;

- a. Adequate structures and machinery should be put in place to ensure proper implementation of policies in the country.
- b. Governments at all levels in the country must ensure that there is continuity in policies and programmes. Regime change should never be allowed to affect public policies and programmes as Government is a continuum.
- c. A conducive environment should be provided by ensuring the availability of basic infrastructural facilities, public utilities, national security and sustainable development.

- d. Policy continuity should be ensured as every succeeding government should evaluate the policies of the preceding government, adopt, implement and sustain the positive and more sustainable ones. This will ensure policy sustenance and discourage the deficiency syndrome of the Nigerian public policies in Nigeria.

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