UNIT 1 PUBLIC POLICY: DEFINITIONS, NATURE, SIGNIFICANCE AND TYPES*

Structure

1.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you should be able to:

- Understand the meaning and nature of public policy;

- Describe the significance of public policy in a globalising world; and

- Describe the types of public policy.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Within the social sciences, the study of public policy acquired a great deal of importance during the second half of the last century. However, a few writers on public policy suggest that modern policy studies began in the early 1920s. The classic literature that laid foundation of policy studies dates back to the year 1950 with Harlod Lasswell's call for the development distinctive policy science (Lerner & Lasswell, 1951). Therefore, it is fair to argue that public policy, as an academic pursuit, emerged during the middle of the last century and since then, it has been acquiring new dimensions, and is struggling hard to achieve the status of a discipline. As a study of the processes of government, policy forms a significant component in many a course and academic programme in numerous

disciplines such as political science, public administration, economics and business management. So rapid is its development that many researchers, academics and practitioners feel that the field is becoming more and more unmanageable. The disciplines required to comprehend public policy cut right across the conventional academic lines of demarcation. Indeed, it is its inter-disciplinary nature which makes the field of public policy interesting and thought provoking.

According to Thomas Dye (1978), in the past, study of public policy was dominated by researchers and students of political science who largely concentrated on the institutional structure and philosophical justification of the government. The focus was rarely on the polices themselves. Political science was to some extent preoccupied with the activities of the various political institutions and groups in relation to their success in the pursuit of political power. It hardly recognised the role which those institutions played towards the formation of a policy as one of its main concerns. Yet public policy is an important element of the political process. Dye further observes that of late the focus of political science has been shifting to public policy – "to the description and explanation of the causes and consequences of government activity". While the concern of political science about the process by which public policies are formulated has increased, most students of public administration would acknowledge that the public servants themselves are intimately involved in the shaping of the policies.

The study of public administration has also been focusing on the machinery concerned with the implementation of policies. It has addressed issues regarding organisation of public authorities, the behaviour of public servants and increasingly, the methods of resource allocation, administration and review. With such an approach, it is difficult to determine much about the way policies are formulated, although it is generally contended that the experience of policy implementation contributes in a significant way for the policy-making process. But the subject of public policy is more political in nature than public administration. It is an effort to apply political science to public affairs, but it also has concerns with the process in the field of public administration. Presently studies on public policy have been mainly dominated by scholars of policy analysis and public administration and have tended to concentrate more on the content of policy, the process of its formulation and its implementation.

1.2 DEFINITION OF PUBLIC POLICY

The concept of public policy presupposes that there is a domain of organised life which is not private or purely individual, but held in common. The point for discussion is to understand what we mean by the idea of 'public policy'. The term public policy comprises two words: Public and Policy.

Idea of Public: In the first place, it is important to understand the term 'public'. We often use such terms as 'public interest', 'public sector', 'public opinion', 'public health', and so on. Therefore, 'Public Policy' has to do with those spheres which are labelled as 'public', as opposed to spheres involving 'private'. Public dimension is generally referred to 'public ownership' or control for 'public purpose'. The word public also subsumes all the dimensions of human activity requiring governmental intervention or social regulation. However, there has always been a conflict between what is 'public' and what is 'private'.

It is argued that public administration emerged as an instrument of the state for securing public interest rather than safeguarding private interests. While the political economists contend that only markets could balance private and public interests, the new liberalism is based on a belief that public administration provides a more rational means of promoting the public interest. For Max Weber, the emergence and growth of bureaucracy was due to the process of rationalisation in the industrial society. The civil servant was conceived as a rational functionary whose main task was to carry out the will of the elected functionaries. Public bureaucracy was, therefore, different from that which existed in the private sector because it was motivated to serve the public interest. This viewpoint, based on rationality, on ensuring public interest, became much less fashionable after the Second World War. Moreover, the distinction between the public and private sectors is getting blurred due to a number of reforms made within the public sector. With the result, these two sectors overlap so much that they cease to be well-defined independent categories.

Idea of Policy: Like the idea of 'public' the idea of 'policy' is also not precisely defined. Policy denotes, among other things, 'guidance for action'. It may take the form of:

- authoritative decision;
- principle or a rule;
- purposive course of action;
- expression of considered judgement;
- action of government.

Unfortunately, the term policy is defined in different ways by writers on public policy. David Easton defines policy as the 'outputs' of the political system and public policy as 'the authoritative allocation of values for the whole society" (Easton, 1953). Henry defines public policy as "a course of action adopted and pursued by government" (Henry, 2012). Anderson suggests that policy be regarded as 'purposive course of action followed by an actor or set of actors dealing with a problem or matter of concern' (Anderson, 1975). To Dye, "public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do". Similarly, Lineberry says that "it is what governments do and fail to do – to and for their citizens" (Lineberry, 1977). For Parsons "a policy is an attempt to define and structure a rational basis for action or inaction" (Parsons, 1975). In brief, 'policy' is a purposive course of action taken or adopted by those in power in pursuit of certain goals or objectives. It should be added here that public policies are the policies adopted and implemented by government bodies and officials.

1.3   NATURE OF PUBLIC POLICY

Public Policy is made by the government (even if the ideas come from the non-official pressure groups or political parties) in response to the public problems but it is implemented by both government and non-government actors. For understanding public policy, it is important to analyse its nature. A policy may be general or specific, broad or narrow, simple or complex, public or private, written or unwritten, explicit or implicit, discretionary or detailed, and qualitative or quantitative. Understanding public policy is an art as well as craft. It is an art as it requires insight and creativity in identifying societal problems, in devising

public policies that might alleviate them and in finding out whether these policies lead to a better quality of life.

Public policy is a craft because these tasks often require some knowledge of social sciences. Here, the emphasis is on the 'public policy' (government policy) which a government chooses as 'guidance for action'. However, instead of specific or definite some policies may suffer from vagueness or riddled with inconsistencies. It is invariably found that a government rarely has a set of guiding principles for all its activities. Important public policies are often made more explicit, particularly where the issue of a law, a regulation, or a plan and the like is involved. The Supreme Court of a country like India may, through its decisions, give new interpretations to some of the articles of the Constitution which may amount to a new policy. Judicial decisions are also policy statements.

As noted earlier, public policies may be too vague or too general and may not always be consistent with each other. In a turbulent environment, government departments often have to take immediate action without reference to any specific policy. Also, sometimes for the sake of political expediency, or for other reasons, a government may announce a specific policy without any intention of carrying it out. Therefore, it is possible to have an action without a policy, or to have a policy without an action. Public policies, because of their 'public' nature, are mostly adopted formally by the government authorities, that is, those with the power to give them a legal sanctity.

A public policy may cover a major portion of its theme/content, such as a development policy, with specified thrust areas. Therefore, a single policy may be found in a number of written documents. A public policy may also be narrow, covering a specific activity, such as family planning, confined to a section of the people or age group, or it may spread to a wider range applied to all people in a State or country. For example, it may have specific policies dealing with specific marginalised groups of people or persons residing in a flood-prone area. Further, public policy is a field which is generally defined by policy areas such as health, education, environment, housing, economic, social and transport). It is largely in this setting that interdisciplinary interactions take place. Besides, each level of government – the Central, the State and the local – may have its specific or general policies. Then, there are the 'mega policies', with general guidelines to be followed by all specific policies. According to Dror, 'megapolicies' act as a kind of a master policy, distinct from concrete or discrete policies, and involve the establishment of overall goals to serve as guidelines for large sets of concrete policies. The broad policies which are an expression of national goals in broad spheres such as economic growth, environment and the like) are examples of megapolicies (Dror, 1968).

Problem solving is the crux of public policy. An important question is whether a policy should contain a definite goal or an objective. By goal or objective we mean the end towards which any action is directed. Since a policy is a guidance for action, it is essential for the public policy to have a goal, an objective or a purpose. All megapolicies, in particular, are purposeful and goal-oriented. But it is conceivable that a government can have a policy without any clear objective or purpose. It can also adopt a policy without specifying what the purpose or goal is, even if it does have one. Even though the goal or objective of a policy is explicitly stated, the policy by itself may be so vague or so general that it may become susceptible to various interpretations. A government may deliberately

adopt vague, inconsistent, or even contradictory policies in order to satisfy all pressure groups and political parties or multiple groups of people. The diversity in public policies is, therefore, a striking characteristic.

As already indicated, a public policy is a purposive course of action. The course of action may be either positive or negative in form. In its positive form, it may involve some form of overt government action to deal with a particular problem. Negatively, it may involve a decision by public servants not to take action on some matter. Public policies sometime have a legally coercive quality that citizens accept as right and proper. For example, taxes must be paid unless one wants to run the risk of fines or imprisonment. This legally coercive nature of public policies makes public organisations distinct from private organisations. Policies ultimately gain considerable support so their repeal is unlikely, as with education or health policies. They may be modified or expanded with certain changes.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1) Explain the meaning and nature of public policy. What is the role of public policy for developing countries?

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2) "Public policy is the authoritative allocation of values" (Easton). Discuss.

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1.4 SIGNIFICANCE AND ROLE OF PUBLIC POLICY

Public policy is an important area of government activity. It is an area which has to do with those spheres which are so labelled as pubic. The concept of public policy presupposes that these are a domain of life which is not private or purely individual, but held in common. As such, public policies have important purposes to serve in the democratic society. Following are some of reasons advanced in favour of the study of public policy.

1.4.1 Theoretical and Scientific Reasons

Anderson (1975), for instance, argues that one studies public policy so that one can know more about the process, both in pursuit of knowledge to pure science

and the practitioner orientation to applied science. It enables one to gain greater knowledge and understanding of the causes and consequences of policy decisions. Public policy may be regarded as either a dependent or an independent variable. When it is viewed as a dependent variable, our focus of attention is on environmental factors that help shape the content of policy. For instance, how do environmental protection and industrialisation help shape the content of policy? On the other hand, if public policy is viewed as an independent variable, our focus of attention shifts to the impact of a policy on the environment. For example, what effect does a specific economic policy have on the labour class? By raising such questions, we can improve our understanding of the linkages between environment and public policy, which in turn, contributes to the development of policy analysis. Not only this, an understanding of the causes and consequences of public policy helps us to apply scientific knowledge to the solution for practical social problems. In other words, the study of public policy helps the development of professional advice on how to achieve particular goals. The professionals, if they understand and know something about public policy, will be in a position to suggest something useful concerning how governments or public authorities can act to achieve their policy goals. Such advice can either be on what policies can be pursued for achieving particular goals or what environmental factors are conductive to the development of a given policy. Beyond this, it is indeed the factual knowledge which is a prerequisite to solving the problems in the public domain.

These days a good deal of attention is being paid to policy analysis. It is contended that the success of policy formulation, execution and evaluation ultimately depends on the success of policy analysis. Conversely, students of public policy derive theoretical knowledge by observing the collective activity of the formulators and implementers of public policy.

1.4.2 Political and Administrative Reasons

There are also political reasons for studying policy. People with political goals study public policy to learn how to advance their preferred policy alternatives. The knowledge which they have acquired through study of policy analysis will enable the administration to engage in such issues as are of public importance and are concerned with the transformation of values into public-making.

Students and scholars of political science and public administration are concerned about what governments should do with appropriate public policies. They contend that the disciplines should not be 'silent' or 'impotent' on current social and political problems, and that they have a moral obligation to put forward a particular policy on a given problem. They should advance a high level of expertise to improve the quality of public policies in whatever ways they think best, regardless of possible disagreements over what constitutes appropriate policies.

1.4.3 Representing Powerful Approach for Improving Economic and Social System

Public policy, as we have analysed, is an important component of the democratic government and its focus is on the public and its problems. It is an area which has to do with the protection and enhancement of the public interest. The major function and role of public policy is to shape the society for its betterment. Wide ranging policies were formulated in the areas of socio-economic development.

Many policies were converted into statutes like Industrial Development and Regulating Act or Land Policy (abolition of the zamindari system in 1961). The state undertook similar responsibility in the social sphere. Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 (with rules notified in 1977); Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Act, 2016; Forest Rights Act, 2016; National Policy for Older Persons (1999); The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 (as amended in 1986); The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (as amended in 1986); The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987; The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (amended in 2007); Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 National Youth Policy (2014); Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act and Rules, 2012; National Health Policy (2017) and so on, are examples of this type. Recently, the Union Government issued an ordinance providing for death penalty to a person convicted for raping a girl under 12 years (2018).

There were also problems of external aggression and national integrity. The external environment was a source of threat and the country had to develop suitable policies to defend itself. Apart from this, there have been internal challenges. Regionalism has given rise to fissiparous tendencies that have to be countered in the long-term perspective. These would include not only defence policies but also similar efforts at decentralisation that create greater national cohesiveness. Thus, since independence, public policies in India have been formulated with a view to achieving socio-economic development and maintaining national integrity.

1.4.4   A Tool for Shaping Future

Public policy as a field is an important mechanism for shaping the future. It is conditioned by the past and concerned with shaping the future for societal betterment. The study of the past is very important as it helps in explaining the present policy system. The past policies perpetuate themselves into present and future policies. The study of public policy is of vital importance even for the present, as it deals with defining policy problems. Thus, present policy-making can be thought of as a problem-solving method, realising that the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power.

We can understand the future by extrapolation of the present trends. The idea of projecting some key social trends into the future may be of great help in this regard. Our collection of data for these purposes may include changes in population growth rates, education, public health and the like. We can carry the process further by forecasting what these projections might look like after a decade. People cannot avoid being concerned with the consequences of public policies.

1.5   POLICY TYPES

Public policy is one of the components of the government action. This section describes how policies can be categorised by type. Lowi (1972) has persuasively argued that there are three primary types of policies – distributive, redistributive and regulatory. All public policies, according to Lowi, are coercive because they seek to alter individual and societal conduct.

1.5.1 Distributive Policies

Distributive policies are, in general terms, policies that are intended to grant some sort of benefit to a particular interest group or other well-defined relatively small groups of beneficiaries. Examples of distributive policy include food relief, farm subsidies, and scholarships to students belonging to weaker sections of the community, and so on.

Legislation regarding implementation of any policy or scheme is likely to be quite specific, and allows little administrative discretions.

1.5.2 Redistributive Policies

Redistributive policies are characterised by actions "intended to manipulate the allocation of wealth, prosperity, personal or civil rights, or some other valued item among social classes or racial groups". Examples of redistributive policies include welfare for persons with disabilities (Disabilities Act, which was enforced in February 1996, deals with both prevention and promotion aspects of rehabilitation for persons with disabilities), civil rights (Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 provides punishment for the practice of untouchability) for social minorities, aid to poor schools, and so on.

1.5.3 Regulatory Policies

Regulatory policies generally are policies that are intended to govern the conduct of business. They seek to alter individual behaviour directly by imposing standards on regulated industries, and are much more likely to arouse controversy. Private interests may be significantly constrained or have compliance costs imposed upon them by regulatory actions. Organisation like the Competition Commission of India (CCI), the Bar Council of India, the Pharmacy Council of India, and the Nursing Council of India are examples of regulatory agencies intended to protect the standards of the respective professions. The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), and so on are engaged in regulatory activities.

1.5.4 Constituent Policy Issues

Later, Lowi (1972) added another type: Constituent Policy issues – the setting-up or reorganisations of institutions. Each of these policy issues forms a different power arena. However, it may be mentioned here that Lowi's view of politics as a function of policies has been criticised as over-simplistic, methodologically suspect, and prone to testability (Cobb and Elder, 1972).

1.5.5 Conflict Policy Issues

In place of Lowi's four policy types, Cobb and Elder propose an alternative classification of policy issues in terms of conflict rather than content. Their focus is on the way in which conflict is created and managed. To them, a conflict may arise between two or more groups over issues relation to the distribution of positions or resources, and may be created by situations such as: (i) Unfairness or bias in the distribution of positions or resources; (ii) Framing of an issue for personal or group gain; (iii) Unanticipated human events, natural disasters, international conflict, war and technological changes.

1.5.6 Bargaining Policy Issues

There are other exponents who have categorised the policy issues on the basis of costs and benefits. For example, Hogwood and Wilson use the criteria of costs and benefits from the point of view of the possibilities of different outcomes, forms of bargaining and conflict, and a range of other alternatives. There are redistribution or cuts issues which involve bargaining over who gets what, who gets more, and who gets less. For Wilson criteria of costs and benefits may be concentrated or dispersed. An issue which may have very concentrated benefits to a small section of society, but whose costs are widely dispersed, is of a different kind to the one that may be for "the greatest happiness of the greatest number". However, such types involving costs and benefits exclude important dimensions of complexity and technical knowledge.

Lowi's ideas of policy types are quite influential because he approaches policies not merely as outputs of government but as something that shapes and is shaped by political conflicts.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit.

1) Discuss different types of public policy.

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2) On the basis of typologies of policies, explain any three categories of policy issues with examples.

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1.6   CONCLUSION

Public policy is an important area of study and practice. Since the emergence of public policy as a field of enquiry, it has expanded in theoretical scope and application. A significant part of the study of public policy consists of the development of scenarios and extrapolations of contemporary trends. Public policy is not only concerned with the description and explanation of the causes

and consequences of government activity, but also with the development of scientific knowledge about the forces shaping public policy. The study of public policy helps us to understand the social ills of the subject under study. Policies do more than effect change in societal conditions. They also hold people together to maintain orderliness in the State. Public policies of a democratic country are important devices and mechanisms for moving a social and economic system from the past to the future.

1.7 GLOSSARY

Classical liberalism: The ideological system that emphasises "individual liberty, and the ownership and acquisition of private property as a means to improve overall wealth and happiness and discourages social strife".

Public interest: A term which is hard to define, but broadly it refers to needs of the public in whose name policy is made.

1.8 REFERENCES

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1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1) Your answer should include the following points:

   - The Meaning, definitions and concept of Public Policy.

   - Theoretical and Scientific Reasons

   - Political and Administrative Reasons

   - Representing Powerful Approach for Improving Economic and Social System

   - A Tool for Shaping Future

2) Your answer should include the following points:

   - Idea of Policy: Like the idea of 'public' the idea of 'policy' is also not precisely defined. Policy denotes, among other things. 'Guidance for action'. It may take the form of:

   - Authoritative decision;

   - Principle or a rule;

   - Purposive course of action;

   - Expression of considered judgement;

   - Action of government;

   - 'Policy' as a purposive course of action taken or adopted by those in power in pursuit of certain goals or objectives. It should be added here that public policies are the policies adopted and implemented by government bodies and officials.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1) Your answer should include the following points:

   - Distributive Policies

   - Redistributive Policies

   - Regulatory Policies

2) Your answer should include the following points:

   - Conflict Policy Issues with examples

   - Bargaining Policy Issues with examples

   - Constituent Policy Issues with examples