Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

PUBLIC POLICY[1]

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A public policy is a document drawn up by governmental actors to present both their vision of an issue calling for public action and, to some extent, the legal, technical, practical and operational aspects of this action.

In a more general sense, public policy may also be said to refer to the process through which elected representatives decide on a public action designed to deal with an issue considered by certain actors, whether governmental or non-governmental, to require some kind of intervention.

According to Muller (2008), the genesis of public policy in the Western world can be traced back to the time when territorialized societies (such as the Ancien Régime in France) developed into sectorized (*sectorialisé*) societies, in which social functions became specialized. Muller explains that territorialized societies are characterized by the fact that individuals identify with the land they inhabit, rather than with the social roles they fulfil, as is the case in sectorized societies. It follows that social control in territorialized societies is necessarily effected through territorial control on the part of a lord or king, for example.

In sectorized societies, social function became the organizing principle with respect to identity; roles grew more specialized and social sectors were created. From the early 18th century onward, the phenomenon was given further impetus by the increasing industrialization of societies. These societies had to find ways of dealing with antagonisms between their various sectors to avoid disintegration (Muller, 2008), and this required different regulatory processes. The appearance of the first regulatory processes in 17th century corresponded to the birth of public policy in Europe.

It was thus the transformation of territorialized societies into sectorized societies that brought about the first instances of state actions that would came to be referred to as public policies and whose complexity, in our time, has grown in pace with the ever expanding list of problems and issues for which government-devised solutions are expected.

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[1] This text is based in part on a section of a chapter by Kaddour Mehiriz, Jean Turgeon and Gilbert Charland, "Les politiques publiques et leur analyse," in N. Michaud (2011), *Secrets d'État: principes et enjeux de l'administration publique*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval.

A certain confusion about what is a public policy, and what is not, is well explained by Lemieux (2002, pp. 1-2), who writes that the term public policy is understood differently by government actors and by university researchers. The author underlines four differences that help to explain why such confusion surrounds the concept. They are presented here along with some contributions from other authors in the field of public policy analysis.

Firstly, while government actors tend to clearly delimit the actions they consider to be public policies, certain researchers go so far as to define public policy as "whatever governments choose to do or not do" (Dye, 1978, p. 3). From this point of view, a public policy exhibits two characteristics. Primarily, it highlights the responsibility of the government that is called upon to intervene by taking a central role in the policymaking process. In the *Dictionnaire des politiques publiques*, for example, Thoenig (2004) states that a public policy refers to a course of action directed at a specific area of society or of a territory on the part of an authority invested with public power and government legitimacy. It follows that the first characteristic to be considered is the origin of a decision. In addition, a public policy can be the result not only of action, but also of inaction, on the part of a government. On this score, Brooks (1998, p. 3) adds that: "Once an issue has been formulated in problematic terms, inaction by policy-makers becomes a deliberate policy choice."

A second difference lies in the way the term public policy is used. What government actors, the general public and the media ordinarily call a public policy corresponds, in the language of researchers, to statements of policy – that is, to public documents approved by those in authority, such as members of Parliament, members of Cabinet, ministers, municipal councils and the executive boards of educational or health institutions.

At the core of every public policy, there should be a vision of the problem or issue that it refers to, as well as the values and broad principles on which it is based and the final goals it seeks. Other components may often be added to this basic core. A policy statement may, for example, contain or present tools (such as incentives, persuasion, constraints, taxation, subsidies or communication) that the government intends to use to achieve its ultimate objectives. For government actors, a statement may also contain specific directions or measures for putting the policy into effect, detailing to some degree the technical, practical and operational aspects of its implementation; for example, services, budgets, human and material resources, project completion schedules, and follow-up and evaluation mechanisms, etc. The operational goals for the two components just described may also be presented.

A third difference is that government actors see public policies as branching off into programs, projects and activities, while such considerations are not part of university researchers' thinking. For example, Jenkins (1978, p. 15) offers this definition of public policy: "a set of interrelated decisions taken by a political actor or group of actors concerning the selection of goals and the means of achieving them within a specified situation where these decisions should, in principle, be within the power of those actors to achieve." For Howlett and Ramesh (2003), Jenkins's definition constitutes a marked improvement on Dye's. While Dye essentially identifies public policies with political decision-making, Jenkins correctly stresses the interdependent, non-isolated nature of decisions in relation to a government's public policies, which are the product of a series of decisions requiring co-ordination on the part of all the governmental actors involved. Jenkins also emphasizes the fact that a public policy is above all focused on achieving a goal and the identification of the means of reaching this goal.

The final difference is that researchers define a public policy as a process in which a government reacts to a situation, occasion, problem or crisis (for example, the H1N1 pandemic). Unlike

governmental actors, researchers do not necessarily take into account the committees and commissions that produce the reports on which the eventual policy statement is based.

The idea of considering public policies as a process is not new. Over half a century ago, Laswell (1956) proposed that public policy involved a decision-making process consisting of seven steps: intelligence, promotion, prescription, invoking, application, termination and appraisal. Following Laswell, several other researchers have proposed models for the process by which public policies are produced, positing a greater or lesser number of stages (Jones, 1970; Brewer, 1974; Anderson, 1975; Brewer and DeLeon, 1983). Lemieux (2002) takes a systemic approach, defining a public policy as consisting of activities focused on finding a solution to public problems in a given environment on the part of actors in a structured relationship, all of which evolve over time (Lemieux, 2002, p. 5). This definition is especially valuable, as it is fuller than that of Dye (1978) or of Jenkins (1978). According to Lemieux, problems should be viewed as stimuli to which a group of actors seek to respond, and public policies represent a means of responding (Lemieux, 2002, p. 5). To enrich the basic notions of problems, solutions and activities that are the focus of the decision-making process, Lemieux adds the concepts of structured power relationships between the actors involved and the evolution of these relationships over time. These concepts have an influence on the definition of the problem, the ultimate goal being sought and the chosen solution. For Muller and Surel (1998), a public policy is the product of governmental decisions involving objectives, means and resources – that is, a set of concrete measures – which constitute the "visible" substance of the policy and which are associated with a given environment or social context, as well as with a complex process in which various governmental and non-governmental actors seek to promote a number of interests, which frequently conflict with one another. From this viewpoint, it is understandable that some researchers consider policymaking to be more of an art than a science (Meier et al, 2001; Wildavsky, 1979). Indeed, the pursuit of many different interests and the constant presence of power relationships constitute elements that shape a public policy at every step of its production, from its emergence to its appraisal, including its design and implementation.

Finally, the adoption of what is known as a public policy statement, or, in less specialized language, simply a public policy, does not automatically lead to implementation. The means called for in terms of financial, material or human resources may not be available. The following factors may also play a mitigating role: those who are supposed to see to a public policy's implementation have a certain amount of leeway when it comes to interpreting decisions, the tools for implementing public policy are not infinitely flexible, and the nature of the targeted problem may impose its own logic on governments and their actions (Thoenig, 2004, p. 329).

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