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RESEARCH NOTE

An Appraisal Of The Techniques For Evaluating Public Policy

Ajila C.O. and Adegoke, A.A.*

Introduction

Policy is a concept which dominates our understanding of the ways we are governed. In current political practice, it means " a prior statement of the actions and commitments of a future government in respect of some area of activity" – their education policy or their environment policy. Policy is a specific set of government action that will, by design or otherwise, produce a particular class of effects. Thus, an actor, for example, the National Women Commission will seek policies say Federal financing of small scale projects for women, that will advance its interest, say, wider work opportunities for all women both rural and urban areas.

According to Colebatch (1999), Policy has to be understood not in terms of intent, but of commitments. He thus opined that : Public policy is the substance of what government does. The pattern of resources, which they actually commit as a response to what they see as public problems or challenges warranting public action for their solution or attainment.

Dye, (1984) sees public policy as whatever government chooses to do or not to do. It is the relationship of a government unit to its environment. (Ranney, 1968; Smith,1974; Eyestone, 1971; Akindele and Olaopa, 2004; Brewer and De Leon 1983). If policy is viewed as government actions that are associated with particular kinds of effects, it follows that government at all levels is continuously "producing" policies, these policies at

* Department of Psychology, Obafemi Awolowo Uuniversity IleIfe, Nigeria.

times may lack certain desirable properties and their precise intent may not be clear. They may appear to be based on differing views of the problem to which they are a response. As a result, some people though apparently needy, may be ineligible for benefits. These government actions despite their collective shortcomings constitute policy nonetheless. The policymaking process then is the process by which the character of government action is determined.

Based on the foregoing, this paper examines what public policy is *vis a vis* the distinction between policy output and policy impact. It finally appraises the various techniques of evaluating public policy.

Distinction Between Policy Output And Policy Impact

Policy outputs are the things governments do - creation of state or more local government, mass transit programme, highway construction, free education (Anderson, 1997; Dunn, 1981; Miyakawa, 2000). In Nigeria, a lot of policy outputs have not achieved its stipulated goals due to the fact that government most often does not know how to find out whether many of the things it does are worth doing at all. For example, the creation of more local government has produced unintended consequences and violent reactions.

A prevailing myth among some laypersons is that once the government makes up its mind to do something and allocates sufficient funds, its goals will be achieved. The myth persists even though experience with policies and programmes such as "operation feed the nation", "better life for rural women" and a host of others, in Nigeria, has shown that this is not the case because many of these programmes have failed to achieve their intended objective.

Briefly, policy outputs are tangible and symbolic manifestations of public policy. They are observable indicators of what governments in fact do (Lynn, 1980; Heclo. 1972; Koven et al, 1998; Nagel 1975). Thus, the amount of money spent on mass transit programme, in Nigeria for example, is policy output. As governments change, so do their priorities. As new societal problems emerge, demands for different policy outputs are articulated. Policy outputs, however tell little if anything about performance. The amount of money spent, the units of services provided, the number of cases handled in a law court are valid measures of policy outputs, but they do not indicate whether or to what extent the desired objectives have been achieved. Policy impact on the other hand refers to performance. That is, the extent to which a policy output has accomplished its stipulated goals.

The impact of a policy has several dimensions (Dye 1984; Deniston et al, 1984). These include:

- The impact on the public problem at which it is directed and on the people involved.

This means that those to whom the policy is expected to affect must be defined

- Policies may have effects on situations or groups other than those at which they are directed
- Policies may have impacts on future as well as current conditions.
- Policies may have indirect costs that are experienced by the community or some of its members

Techniques For Evaluating Policies

According to Nachmias (1975), policy evaluation research is the objective, systematic and empirical examination of the effects ongoing and public programmes have on their targets in terms of goals they are meant to achieve. In this sense, policy evaluation research is goal-oriented research focusing on effectiveness rather than on the decision-making processes that lead to the adoption of policies. With systematic, objective information on the impact of policies, better decisions can be reached, ineffective programmes can be abandoned, and more responsible budget allocations can be made.

With the growth of policy evaluation research activities, two distinct but interrelated types of evaluation have emerged:

(i) process evaluation and (ii) impact evaluation. (Freeman and Sherwood, 1970; Akindele and Olaopa, 2004; Weiss, 1972). Process evaluation is concerned with the extent to which a particular policy or programme is implemented according to its stated guidelines. The contest of a particular policy and its impact on those affected may be substantially modified, elaborated, or even negated its implementation.

The second type of evaluation research, impact evaluation is concerned with examining the extent to which a policy causes a change of operationally defined policy goals, specification of criteria of success, and measurement of progress.

Policy evaluation research like all scientific research has six distinct but interrelated research operations.

--- Identification of goals.
--- Construction of a causal impact model

--- Development of an appropriate research design
--- Measurement and standardization
--- Data collection
--- Data analysis and interpretation. (Nachmias,1975)

The operations are now discussed in details below :

1. When the goals of a policy or a programme are ambiguous, diffuse, or diverse, assessment of the extent to which they have been achieved becomes a formidable task, Not all policies and public programmes are subject to the same degree of ambiguity in the setting of goals. The goal of manpower retraining programmes, for instance, is to import marketable occupational skills, and their effectiveness can be assessed by the extent to which they manage to do so. Indeed, there might be some disagreement over what occupational skills are and which ones are more marketable, but unless participants in the programme are able to function better in the job market, the programme is ineffective.

   Several procedures and considerations are helpful when attempting to identify a programme's goals. First, it is useful to distinguish among immediate, intermediate, and ultimate goals. Immediate goals are the anticipated results of the specific programme with which one is momentarily concerned.

   Intermediate goals are the actual activities of individuals involved in the programme, and the ultimate goals are the final anticipated consequences of policies and programmes.

Second, the programme's personnel are to be consulted and asked to specify its goals. One can read about the programme if there are written documents, or talk to practitioners, observe the programme operation, and then sit down and frame the statement of goals yourself. Two major problems may evolve from such an indirect procedure. One is that the researcher may read his own professional preconceptions into the programmes and subtly shift the goals in the direction of his own interest. The other problem is that when the research is completed, the decision makers and the programme personnel may dismiss the findings, arguing that they had been trying to accomplish different goals.

A third procedure and perhaps the most useful for identifying goals, is for the researcher to collaborate with the programme initiators and personnel in the very early stage of the programme. Conferring with the programme people, the researcher can suggest successive approximation to the goal statements, the programme staff can modify them and discussion can continue until the goal is reached.

2. Having identified the goals of a policy, the researcher can proceed to construct an impact model, the empirical analyses of which can provide evidence of the extent to which the policy has accomplished its goals. More explicitly, an impact model consists of input statements; one or more propositions concerning the changes that the input (policy or programme) is expected to produce and how the changes will affect the behaviour or the conditions intended to be modified (Freeman and Scherwood, 1970

Koven et al 1998). For example, decision makers might have reached the conclusion that there is insufficient utilization of public transportation in big cities. The objective of their programme might be a substantial increase in such use, and they may develop a programme based on economic incentives as a means for accomplishing the objective. Even if the programme does not explicitly state so, decision makers will cause changes in people's behaviour. Furthermore, they are assuming that their programme will produce the desired changes in behaviour and that these changes will lead to a greater utilization of public transportation. The decision makers are also probably supposing that a greater utilization of public transportation will reduce pollution, conserve energy, and reduce traffic congestion. Conferring with decision makers and programme personnel before, during and after construction of the impact model is useful for a number of reasons. First, the chain of reasoning that led the decision makers to choose a particular policy may be better appreciated. Secondly, the courses of action taken by the programme personnel have in many cases to be incorporated into the impact model. In the process of implementation, programme personnel might encounter unanticipated problems of such significance that the impact model would have to be modifies to include them as critical variables. Impact models represent certain aspects of reality, the more for purposes of evaluation.

Last, if decision makers and programme personnel are consulted there is a higher probability that the study findings will affect future decisions concerning the policy or programme. To be

incorporated into the decision making process, evaluation finding must be adequately communicated to decision makers and programme implementers. Such findings can be more effectively communicated if the overall framework of the evaluation study is understood and agreed upon.

3. Once the impact model is developed, the researcher is confronted with the task of structuring the process of collecting measuring, analyzing, and interpreting data. This is the aim of a research design. It is logical model of proof that guides the investigator in the various stages of the research.

4. Once the goals are identified and the impact model constructed, some measurable standards must be set to determine how much progress toward the goals has been achieved. In other words, it is essential in policy evaluation research to measure the impact of policies and the relationships among the variables in the impact model. Just as policy impact vary, so do programme variables. For example, in manpower retraining programme some participants attend every session whereas others attend irregularly; some participants receive more attention from instructors than others do. Participants also vary by sex, age, race or ethnicity, socio-economic background, and many other important variables. Furthermore variations are found among programme personnel, length of service, location, management and implementation. All these lead to programme variations. Measurement of such variations is important because it fills in the details of what the general programme description has outlined.

5. Once an impact model is constructed and an appropriate research design is developed, a decision must be made about what kinds of data are to be collected and how they are to be analyzed. Data for policy evaluation research can be obtained from various sources and by various methods. Which are generally classified as obtrusive or unobtrusive (Nachmias, 1979). Obtrusive data collection methods refer to procedures in which data are collected through some form of direct solicitation and in which programme personnel and participants are aware that research is going on. The more commonly used obtrusive methods are interviews, questionnaires, and various forms of observation. Unobtrusive methods of data collection are procedures that remove the investigator from the phenomenon being researched. For example, documents such as minutes of board meetings or newspaper accounts represent unobtrusive data because the conditions leading to their generation are not influenced by the behaviour and the expectations of the researcher.

The more commonly used obtrusive and unobtrusive methods are briefly described below :

(i) The interview is a face-to-face interpersonal role situation in which an interviewer asks the respondent questions designed to obtain answers pertinent to the evaluation study. The questions, their wordings and their sequence define the extent to which the interview is structured. The most structured form of interview is the schedule-structured interview, in which the questions, their wordings and their sequence are fixed and are identical for every respondent. Another form of interviewing is the focused

interview. This form has distinct features: (a) it is conducted with respondents known to have been involved in a particular programme: (b) it refers to situations that have been analyzed prior to the interview: (c) it proceeds in the basis of an interview guide that specifies topic related directly to the study: and (d) it is focused on the subjective experience involved in the situations under study. Respondents are given considerable liberty in expressing their definitions of the situations that is presented by the interviewer. The focused interview makes it possible to probe and obtain details such as personal reaction and specific emotions. The least structured form of interview is the nondirective interview. Here, no prespecified set of question is employed, nor are the questions asked in a specified order, and no schedule is used. With little or no direction from the interviewer, respondents are encouraged to relate their experience, to describe whatever events seem significant to them, to provide their own definitions of their situations, and to reveal their opinions as they see fit.

(ii) Questionnaires are another method of data collection widely used in evaluation research to obtain factual and attitudinal data. The question must be worded so that they are comprehended by the respondent in the manner that the researcher intends.

Questions in a questionnaire can be either open-ended or close-ended (fixed alternative). In a close-ended question, respondents are offered a set of answers from which they are asked to choose one that most closely represents their views. For example, to measure the effectiveness of a manpower-retraining programme, participants could be asked the following fixed alternative questions:

"To what extent did the manpower re-training programme help you to get along with your present job?"

— To a very great extent [ ]
— To a great extent [ ]
— Little extent [ ]
— Not at all [ ]
— Don't Know [ ]

Open-ended questions are not followed by any kind of choice, and the respondents' answers are recorded in full.

6. Lastly, decisions about the kinds of data analysis techniques to use are governed by social science research as much by convention as by consideration of research design. For policy evaluation research, where the concern is over notions of change, prediction and causality, regression analysis is a suitable and effective technique. Interpretation of the findings in view of the impact model and the goals set for the policy conclude one cycle of the research process. If the study is well executed, it will provide systematic and empirical evidence of the extent to which the policy has accomplished its goals. Such evidence will, of course, have to compete with a host of other factors that decision makers take into consideration in the process of making public policy decisions.

Conclusion

We have examined in this paper the meaning of public policy *vis-à-vis* policy output and policy impact. We also examined the techniques for evaluating policies. We thus argued that no one source nor one method exclusively suits evaluation research. To a large extent, decisions about the kinds of data to be collected are governed by the nature of the policy to be evaluated, the kinds of variables included in the impact model, and the research design. Furthermore, there is no one source of data or one method of collection that does not have some inherent limitations. Thus, the researcher should be aware of the advantages as well as the problems involved in employing any kind of data and any data collection method.

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