Evidence Informed Policy Making: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

Traditional way of policymaking process –top-down approach- is thought to be less effective as this hardly consults with the pertinent stakeholders who are the mainly implementers and beneficiaries. In order to address the shortcomings of that approach, policy scientists advocate undertaking such policies, which are based on data, value-driven and people-centric. This process is called evidence-informed policy making (EIPM). This study analyzes EIPM process how effectively it works and why it brings benefits to the citizen. It is found that because of scientific procedure, bottom-up approach, consultation and involvement of diverse stakeholders, research-driven data, the EIPM yields positive results. Any public policy taken following the EIPM process is found environmentally fit, administratively workable, politically and socially acceptable, and economically and financially viable.

Keywords: Public policy; Stakeholder; Bottom-up approach; EIPM; Economic

Abbreviations: EIPM: Evidence-Informed Policy Making; SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic And Time-Bound; SA: Stakeholder Analysis; MCA: Multi-Criteria Analysis

Introduction

Theoretical underpinnings of public policy making epitomize the process of undertaking government's strategic inventions in order to bring positive change in behavior of people and effectively contribute to overall socio-economic and cultural development of a country [1-4]. Traditional approach of policy making is being reprimanded due to the policy failure, mostly keeping all discredits within the implementation process that starts the blame game for unexpected results between the policy makers and the implementers [5,6]. Researchers evidently found that the dearth of implementation theory until 1970s, criticism for policy failure was never treated as a part of the policy makers. It seems the policy makers, particularly the stakeholders at formulation stage are the powerful agents who actually think them as the architect of public policy ignoring the ultimate results and the result makers in the end. Top-down approach is traditionally much practiced for policy making while the policy analysts particularly the pragmatic policy researchers found the process as misleading and erroneous. Evidence informed policy making (EIPM) is a paradigm shift in the policy making process from the top-down approach to the objectively chosen government's initiatives based on scientifically adopted systematic approach considering all possible stakeholders and intended and unintended consequences.

Evidence informed policy making (EIPM) and its assumptions, process and tools

EIPM reinvigorates the practical assumptions for convincing the policy makers; policy scientists based on research-based evidences so that these initiatives are neither rejected outright at designing stage nor turned up as misled or meaningless output [7]. Through EIPM, capacity of public officials is developed based on fundamental tools systematically. These tools are sequentially arranged and hierarchically set so that the preceding tool connects the next one and coherent learning takes place. These hierarchical settings start with analyzing problem tree, setting objectives, analyzing stakeholder, identifying possible policy options, assessing multi-criteria, recommending policy option(s) and finally preparing an action plan how to implement recommended policy.

Policy intervention usually starts with the problem that identifying exact problem for intervention is not only crucial but also important to address it effectively. If the problem is rightly identified, policy is easier to undertake. In most cases people come with several symptoms rather the core problem and finally symptoms-based policy yields no or minimal results. EIPM teaches how to identify the core problem through problem tree analysis. On a given case or problem area that needs to address, trainees prepare problem tree with core problem in the middle (tree stem), causes (roots) below the stem, effects (branches) on the top where main roots are primary causes, small ones are secondary and smallest are tertiary causes. Similarly main branches are primary effects and gradually tertiary effects are on the top. This problem tree analysis helps understand the association among the core problem, causes and effects. It also shows the magnitude of the problem and thus helps extract exact area to address by undertaking policy. This tool teaches that it is needed to address the problem not the effects as the effects are result of the problem. Following the problem tree analysis tool, if the bureaucratic policy makers can identify the primary causes and intervene those, the problem will likely be solved.

Once problem tree is meticulously done, policy analysts can set the general objective (or goal) to target the core problem of the tree. Formation of general objective is the positive statement of solving the kye problem. The problem tree also guides to select some specific objectives which are usually setting of positive statements of primary effects. However, for easier understanding and specifying the objectives, it is better to formulate specific objectives targeting the primary causes of the problem tree. Specific objectives must be specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound (SMART). Well-crafted specific objectives guide the policy stakeholders what exactly they have intended to achieve by formulating the policy.

Formulation of public policy involves multiple stakeholders. Stakeholder analysis (SA) is the identification of key stakeholders in a planning or change in process, and an assessment of their interests and the interests which are likely to affect the policy process [8,9]. It is both institutional and social analysis to develop a plan to identify appropriate forms of stakeholder participation. Through the process, key stakeholders who can significantly influence, or contribute to the success of the planning or change process are identified. There are some types of stakeholders such as approvers, supporters, constrainers, opponents, collaborators, beneficiaries and losers, Moreover, specifically, doing a stakeholder analysis can draw out the interests of stakeholders in relation to the problems which the intervention is seeking to address; identify conflicts of interests between stakeholders, which will influence the (change) manager's assessment of the intervention's riskiness before funds are committed; identify relations between stakeholders which can be built upon and may enable coalitions of project or change sponsorship, ownership and co-operation; assess the appropriate type of participation by different stakeholders at different stages of the planning process who are

benefited from the process. Policy analysists are required to place all stakeholders in 2x2 matrix in order to assess the significance based on their interest and power for solving the problem. This process also helps identifying who can do and undo the policy and thus dictates how to manage stakeholders at the very beginning of the policy process.

SA dictates to get approval from the political masters who are in charge of the concerned ministries. SA provides grounds of managing high powered stakeholders (players), keeping some satisfied who have high power but low interest (actors), informing well the stakeholders having high interest but low power (subjects) and monitoring the group having both low power and interest for solving the problem (bystanders). It is noticeable that players can move or shake the policy; actors may act as disguised missiles; subjects are the key beneficiaries while bystanders are less important.

SA also helps analyzing possible threats and risk, which are likely to affect the policy making process at any stage and undertaking measures beforehand. This process is checked after the multicriteria analysis because of the detailed explanation. After the stakeholder's analysis, policy makers identify all possible policy options to address the main (usually primary) causes of the problem tree. A number of policy options, either exclusive or grouped, are initially thought to undertake to solve the primary problem and ultimate problem of the case. Policy options are the positive statement combining a number of activities with a pragmatically designed combination to solve the problem. These options are set in way that undertaking of any or more than one options contribute to obtain expected results.

All possible policy options to solve the problem identified need to be scientifically evaluated based on the criteria in order to select the best one or more than one. To evaluate each option, policy analysts are required to check the suitability of each option based on multiple criteria namely administrative, fiscal (financial), economic, social and environmental impacts. This process helps identifying all possible impacts based on evidences they garner from the primary and secondary sources or from their practical experiences. Assessing these impacts meticulously and scientifically result in producing the better reasoning to choose the best one. These impacts are both qualitative and quantitative inputs. This multi-criteria analysis (MCA) is the basic input and fundamental issue of EIPM. Multi-criteria analysis (MCA) comprises of various classes of methods, techniques and tools (with different degrees of complexity) which explicitly consider multiple objectives and criteria (or attributes) in decision-making problems [10-12]. So, the mastery of conducting MCA results in better policy articulation [11,13,14]. The MCA convinces policy makers to adopt a or the policy which is administratively functionable, financially profitable, economically viable, socially acceptable and environmentally feasible. Moreover, all stakeholders are kept on board to render their support. And this is the beauty and bottom-line of EIPM. Although MCA is a qualitative

tool of policy analysis, it helps figuring out the quantitative value based on possible impacts categorizing into five broad area namely, administrative, financial, economic, social and environmental.

The higher the number of each policy option based on aggregated value of each criterion; the higher policy option is more likely to be suitable. Usually, the higher value achieving policy option is the recommended policy. However, MCA also helps understand the policy researchers to ruminate to solve problem by undertaking more than one policy options which can be in short, medium and long-term basis.

One of the effective tools of EIPM is the detailed action plan that helps preparing list of all activities for implementing policy options, identifying involved performers (implementers and monitors), fixing the time-line, checking monitoring mechanisms. This action plan provides the pragmatism in the policy making process that comes up with the fruitful implementation with maximum intended benefits.

Importance of EIPM

Policy researchers advocate that the systematic process of utilizing multiple tools to check the viability and rationality at every stage based on the concrete evidences and criteria are significant to formulate a scientifically acceptable policy [15]. The EIPM adopts that in such a way that policy options are selected based on the criteria so that the process rectifies all limitations of traditional approach, involves all relevant stakeholders, assess all possible risks and plausible remedies, and implement following a scientifically prepared action plan. Since EIPM is a scientific process of assessing the policy decisions and guiding the decision makers to accept the best alternative, the process is acceptable for all sorts of decision making at organizational level. The skill is not only important to organizational development but also helpful for individual professional aggrandizement [16].

It is evidently argued that EIPM supports analyzing and identifying the practically feasible policy options based on some objectively designed criteria. It also deals with the process that develops the best policy to address the setbacks of traditionally adopted policy. However, main limitation of the EIPM is the emphasis on problem-based policy making which prefers to address the existing issue to deal with the present while exploratory issue cannot be undertaken. Moreover, the variation of analysis is contingent to the use of time available, nature of data available, analytical skills of policy analysts and the administrative culture of policy making organizations. Nevertheless, public policy making mostly handles the reactive policy that effectively fits with the process of EIPM.

Conclusion

Considering the multiple angles of resources and time-dimensions, EIPM provides a respite to the bureaucratic policy makers to craft public policy by creating it environmentally fit, administratively workable, politically and socially acceptable, and economically and financially viable through a scientifically adopted procedure.

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