Actors in Public Policy

Dr. Paromita Chakraborty, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Surendranath College

It is difficult for any policy formulator to make policy in isolation. Hence, for effective formulation of policies, cooperation of various players is essential and interaction between the formal and informal channels provides the basis for a more informed policy dialogue.

Policy formulation usually occurs in government bureaucracy, offices of interest groups, meetings of special commissions and policy planning organizations. The formal channels include the legislative, executive and political wings of the government. The informal channels of policy formulation include the political parties, civil society organizations, trade unions etc. Various agencies are involved in formulation and development of a policy. In India, the agencies that play the role of public policy making are: Cabinet; legislature; opposition political parties; pressure groups and NGOs; bureaucrats; and citizens.

Constitutional rules specify how those in authority use their official positions in formulating policies. Thus, the policy formulation process in India is shaped within the framework of the constitutional system. The Indian system of government is a parliamentary type of government both at the Centre and the States, in which the government consists of the political executive, the Council of Ministers and the administrative executive, the civil servants. The ministers are responsible and answerable to the parliament and legislature, regarding policy matters. A conscious effort has been made to define and demarcate clearly the areas of policy formulation between the central and state governments by listing the subjects in the central list, state list and concurrent list. Usually the central government enjoys great powers for the formulation of policies in the developmental sectors of the economy.

Formal Actors

The following are the government organs that shape the policy formulation process.

1. Legislature- the Parliament is the supreme policy making body. Even the Prime Minister is dependent on the support of the legislature to remain in office. The Parliament in India makes the laws and policies and legitimizes the decisions of the government. Parliament

serves as a forum for public debate on issues of public policies. Within the powers devolved to them by the Constitution, the parliament is the final determinant of a policy.

However one must note that the legislature can only influence and does not have direct power, can only advice and not command policy matters, can just criticize and not obstruct a policy. The legislature can thus scrutinize the policy proposals put forward by the Prime Minister and cabinet members but cannot take the initiative on its own.

2. Executive- In a parliamentary system of government, the executive plays a major role in policy formulation because of the greater concentration of power in the government. The executive mainly consists of: Cabinet which is the supreme executive authority; it is the top policy formulation body in the government. The Cabinet is serviced in its policy role by the Cabinet Secretariat headed by the cabinet secretary, and then is the Council of Ministers consisting of the Prime Minister, cabinet minister, ministers of state and the deputy ministers.

The PM enjoys a special position in the realm of policy formulation. The Prime Minister (PM) is the head of the government and responsible for the entire functions of the government. While the Prime Minister can exert exceptional influence over policy decisions through the assistance of the cabinet secretariat, it is now widely accepted that a Prime Minister has to obtain the support of his/her colleagues for his decisions. The Prime Minister is assisted by a set of staff employed in his/her office.

3. Civil Servants/Bureaucrats – they assist the Cabinet in the discharge of its functions. In theory, civil servants are employed to serve ministers by carrying out their decisions. That is, the Ministers decide on policies and the civil servants take necessary executive action to implement them. However in practice, the civil servants exercise much more power in the formulation of public policies.

4. Judiciary- generally speaking, the judiciary does not interfere with the policy matters of the legislature or the executive, unless the policy is either against the Constitution. The Judiciary in India plays a constructive role in shaping and influencing public policies in two ways: by its power of judicial review and by judicial decisions. However, of late, the judiciary, notably the Supreme Court has been greatly influencing the contents of public policies through the exercise of the power of judicial review of legislation. There are instances to show the role of the judiciary in policy formulation, viz. equal protection of law, property ownership, position

of women in society, etc. Thus, judges pronounce judgements on various issues like social and economic issues, gender concerns, etc. which have wider policy implications.

Informal Channels of Policy Formulation

The official policymakers are those who possess legal authority to engage in the formulation of public policy. They are governmental actors who occupy formal public positions and political offices.

Unofficial policymakers do not occupy formal public positions or political offices. They are not in government but they derive their relevance and policy-making roles from government and the official policy makers. Mainly, they harness their interests and demands, harmonise them and influence official policymakers to factor them into the policymaking process. Some of the informal channels of policy formulation include individual citizens; the media; political parties and civil society organizations.

1. Individual Citizens- In a democratic form of government, public opinion plays a major role in the policy formulation process. Yet, in practice, participation of people in policy formulation is negligible. The individual citizen is hardly a significant political force. However, it should also be noted that no government, however dictatorial, can afford to go against the wishes of the people. Therefore, the interest of citizens matters a lot. Governments, all over the world, tend to listen and pay attention to what their citizens desire in order to minimise social unrest and avoid violent agitations. Citizens can vote out any political party or the personalities involved if they are not satisfied with their policy programmes.

2. The Media- The role of media in the policy formulation process is an important factor. The media bridge the information gap between the citizen and the government. They communicate information to the citizens about the decisions the governments have taken and thereby media help shape their reactions to each other's decisions.

3. Political Parties- Political parties are regarded as important agents for establishing popular control over the government and public policies. They refer to groups of like-minded people who have come together with the sole intention of gaining the control of the machinery of

government. As they pursue their primary interest of gaining governmental power, they play prominent roles in the policy process. A political party that controls the lever of power tends to influence their members in government to formulate policies that will project and protect their party programmes and manifesto.

4. Civil Society Organizations (CSO) - They strive to influence the decisions of the government without attempting to occupy political offices. CSOs also include NGOs, research institutes, religious organizations, lobbying and advocacy groups, etc. CSOs have a vital input in the policy-making process. CSOs are important institutions in enhancing the effect of public opinion. CSOs serve as links between individual citizens and policy makers.

To policy makers, the associations offer expertise and political support. The organizations also articulate the interests and demands of the society seek support for these demands among other groups by advocacy and bargaining and strive to transform these demands into public policies. For example, women's organizations such as All India Women's Conference, Mahila Milan, Self-Employed Women's Association in India (SEWA), etc. have already influenced the enactment of a number of statutes such as Anti-Dowry Act, Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, etc.

Hence one can say that various actors both formal and informal play an important role in policy making process