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On Principles of Policy Making and Implementation

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a compact synthesis of the intricate affairs of policy making and implementation performed by empires, governments, and organizations around the world, since the earliest civilizations until the contemporary modern civilizations today. This paper propounds some essential principles in policy making and implementation that could serve as important guides for all ruling and management elites involved in running the state and public affairs—which are indeed a reflection of a vast array of human needs in society. Faulty thinking in policy making and implementation can be avoided by using the principles.

Keywords: policy making, policy formulation, policy implementation, policy philosophy



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INTRODUCTION

We are not the only people that have lived in this world. Historically, since the early human civilizations, people have governed themselves through the formation of ruling elites and state arms, formulation of policies, and construction of institutions. They have used a lot of world resources until the extent of their own extinction and demise. Emperors and kings have used policies to regulate people and also used the military to expand their empire. Today, even in the name of democracy, the republic, or the nation state, human beings still continue that tradition in many ways. Hence, we, the people of today, are the embodiments of our long history and tradition, at least in the way we build governments and govern ourselves (Radice, 1987; Appleyard, 2004).

Human beings have thousand and one needs, ranging from biological needs to religious needs and political needs. All these needs need to be fulfilled in some ways or another, either by individual effort or collective effort. All policies, especially the legal and bureaucratic ones, are a reflection of the ways and means of fulfilling the vast array of human needs from time to time (Sufean, 2002b). Thus, modernism seems to be in parallel with legalism and 'policyism,' that is, putting on paper what the government must do to arrive at the desired state of well-being of all individuals in society (Mohd Salleh Abbas, 2003). At times, people invent policies to the detriment of themselves, e.g. marriage laws, business monopoly laws, and corporate merging laws—the laws that make human relations more distrustful and complex among each other than being honest and simple.

Today, most human needs are translated into political agendas. The superpowers want to monopolize critical resources for industrialization and technology development such as oil, uranium, money, and scientists. Using this criterion, they determine which countries to be their ally and protectorate. At another level, the politicians and NGOs (non-governmental bodies) harp on certain human need issues to gain popularity, power, and support funds. Innumerable instances of this trend happen around us every day (Light, 1992). Thus, we can posit that policy and politics are now the center stage of modern day life drama in all governments in the world.

PRINCIPLES OF POLICY MAKING

Fundamentally, policies can be equated as the desire to build an ideal harmonious society. This is the main principle. Today, we understand that policies are perpetually being made for addressing developmental issues, modifying people's behaviors, or solving immediate problems in society. Importantly, policies have some much desired outcomes and numerous targeted beneficiaries, the justifications for why the policies are being made. Importantly also, policies usually involve the provision of resources at many levels, including participants and expenditures, and therefore policies must be formulated well by weighing many considerations before they are being launched and implemented.

There are big policies and small policies. The big ones are utopian in nature i.e. the mega projects to develop ultra-modern infrastructure involving billions of dollars e.g. aerospace projects, super speed railways, metropolis projects, and star wars defense projects. The utopian policies do not address emerging critical problems in society, or focus on regulating bad behaviors of people. The utopian policies and projects usually do not come from the people but from the ruling elites in the government who somewhat impose their fancy ideas upon the people who



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are expected to fund the projects. Historically, there have been many utopian policies and projects done in many countries and civilizations, but they are less functional today and there are many sad stories behind them. Why? They are not sustainable. They cause environmental destruction, economic collapse, and social destruction. For example, today we have toxic wastes, environmental pollution, social conflicts, transmitted diseases and epidemics, inflation, market manipulation, and corruption on the rise. We are living in a paradox: progressive development vis-à-vis destruction of ecology and society. Hence, a good policy should be sustainable, that is, it does not lead to economic burden, political chaos, or ecological catastrophe. This is the second principle.

In addressing human needs and problems, policies made should target the specific beneficiaries in the society and delineate the specific values to be attained. Every policy must have this end result; otherwise the policy has no socio-moral focus and no beneficial outcomes for the public. This is the third principle. For example, the diesel subsidy policy for fishermen should lead to higher volume of fish to be landed, and thus lower the fish price in the market; but if the subsidy causes high volume smuggling of diesel to other countries, then the policy has a big problem in enforcement and does not help in lowering down the fish price in the market. This is a bad policy.

Another example is the vocational education policy. This policy must be targeted to 60 % of students who have just finished primary education by building more vocational schools with many different areas of study. Like the German model, 70 % students in the secondary school level are in the vocational and technical schools. The trained students will then later enlarge the small business sector, or become the highly-skilled technicians for many industries. But in Malaysia, the number of vocational schools in every district now is not sufficient to carry out the policy using the German model. This will not help the economy to expand in the future. Therefore, the Ministry of Education must give more priority and funds to build many more vocational schools in order to produce more highly-skilled technical workforce to support industrial expansion and thus build up the Malaysian economy. Policy making must be specific in terms of the focus group and benefits.

It is never too late for policy makers in Malaysia to be incremental but specific in their thinking. They can learn policy thinking and policy making for making better policies in the future. Directive kind of policies—those announced by the mouth of political leaders in ad hoc manner—are not necessarily good because they are “putting out the bush fire kind” of policies. The cause of fire is not tackled, the beneficiary group is not specific, and the benefits do not go back to the system, both long term and short term.

Usually, a good public policy comes out from a healthy debate in a democratic forum. Proponents and opponents argue about the aims, values, alternatives, costs, and mechanism surrounding a viable policy. The democratic process is to find the best alternative to deal with a problem or issue, to design the best mechanism and strategy to carry out the alternative, and to draw up the most cost-effective plan for implementing the policy alternative. This is the fourth principle, the democratic process of policy making. The policy makers are largely accountable for the failure of a policy, rather than always blaming the policy implementers not doing their job well enough. Caution also to the directive type of policy that comes out oftentimes from the political masters. Most directive policies do not consider thoroughly the mechanism of implementation as well as the budget for implementation; the directive policies are just to win the hearts of certain groups of people but not the entire public.

As mentioned before, policies are made to fulfill human needs in society. However, the needs must be critical and pervasive in the public, i.e. the needs must not be limited to a small group of people such as the business group. For example, the computer literacy policy must consider the long term use and maintenance of computers in



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schools for the benefit of a large population of students for several years, rather than on the high volume one-off supply and installation of computers by some business corporations. The majority of the population must get the benefits more than the minority supply group. The interest and welfare of the majority must weigh more than the profit-making interest of the minority. This is the fifth principle of policy making.

To elaborate further, today the business groups are making their way into policy making by selling concepts such as globalization, quality, high performance, internationalization, rationalization, public safety, and global index. This is to create fear of losing in the global competition. Governments are being induced to buy such concepts and thus making directive policies favoring the minority. The majority or the public are losing their say but yet they are being hand-twisted to pay for policies that are novel and comical to them. It is happening around the world. The fifth principle is being abandoned by the vanguard elites of the society. As a result, public distrust and apathy arises against the backdrop of rising country debt, corruption, crimes, and economic collapse—the common story of a falling empire. The rich is victimizing the poor, and the rich-poor gap is widening apart. Iceland, Greece, Brazil, and Spain are now in the League of Nations that are not economically sustainable. Malaysia is now having an internal debt at the critical level of 53 %--the doom level is 55 %. Hence, against the looming bleak future, the fifth principle of policy making must be reinstated back again to its ethical position in governance. Do not forget or abandon it.

Oftentimes, policies are made to address many issues affecting the society. There are common issues today such as drug trafficking and abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse, crime warlords and gun-shooting, rising costs of living and houses, low foreign investment, rising number of foreign migrants, and low retirement security. Some issues are cyclical, some are short duration, some are intense, some are critical, and some are resilient. Policy makers must know the nature of issues and problems. The correct identification of problems and issues will lead to the right alternative and strategies, to begin with. Failure to know and understand the nature of issues and problems will lead to failure in policy implementation. This is the sixth principle. The policy makers are solely accountable to this principle.

In education, dropout is an ongoing issue, never to be solved completely. This is because the demography and characteristics of dropout always change. For example, Malaysia in the 1960s, dropout was strongly associated with poverty; poor families could not support their children's education. Today, however, dropout is caused mainly by the lack of social infrastructure in remote areas, especially in Sabah and Sarawak, which thus make accessibility to schools difficult. Another causal factor is the low attitude towards the importance of education among the society and students in rural areas. Even in urban areas, more and more students find that schools are very academically narrow in focus and exam-oriented and thus schooling has little meaning for self and vocational development. The boys, especially, think that it is better to get out from high schools and go to work, where they find more meanings to their life.

Hence, problem identification is crucial in policy making. In the case of dropout issue, it is associated with many problems, apart from poverty and attitude. It can be associated with boredom, motivation, learning problems, and teacher problems. A research must be done to identify the extent and prevalence of dropout in society, and to determine the major causes of dropout. With some degree of certainty and validity based on research evidence, the policy makers can draw up alternatives and strategies to tackle the various problems that underlie school dropout. This is the seventh principle, i.e. the need for empirical evidence through research.



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Closely related to the seventh principle is the thinking that one issue has many underlying problems, and one problem gives rise to a few alternative solutions, and each alternative has its own peculiar strategy. This is the multiple chain reaction effect. This is the eighth principle. Therefore, policy making is never simplistic, and the policy makers are consequently accountable to the failure of a policy action plan. Never make a policy if the issue and problems are not well-identified and the multiple reaction effect is not properly and systematically drawn out; otherwise it would be a waste of time and money.

Some policies appear to be viable and possible, but they can create public outcry and riots. For example, getting foreign loans to fund a long bridge construction, or increasing sales tax to fund unemployment allowance, or downsizing a public university to increase research projects, or building nuclear power plants to produce cheaper energy. These policies are viable and sensible, but they can lead to the toppling down of a government; hence they are not politically feasible. Therefore, policies must be ecologically safe, economically viable, but also politically feasible. This is the ninth principle. The public must not be burdened, and public order must be maintained. A tyrannical government, however, will not heed this principle.

Democratically, the ruling government and the citizens are in a bilateral relationship, one assuring the welfare and well-being of the citizens whereas the other contributes taxes to fund government policies and programs. The government is the caretaker while the citizens are the sponsor. A prudent government usually tends to cut down unnecessary bureaucratic arms and expenses, and use available funds for improving social services for the citizens, especially education, health, food production, and transportation. A prudent government also avoids excessive borrowings so as to minimize financial burden on the citizens. This is the ethics of good governance, by which both parties have to stand by. This is the tenth principle of policy making. No wastage, no victimization, no power abuse, and no corruption; otherwise, the citizens have to pay more and a vicious cycle will emerge. Policy makers and political masters should observe this principle. The Nordic countries such as Finland, Norway, and Sweden are examples of good ethical governance. Their school curriculum also lays emphasis on citizenship education and local community development.

Machiavellian thinking, good ends justify the means, is not necessarily good. Oftentimes it has flouted cultural, ecological, and moral sanctity. For example, the construction of giant dams and reservoirs has sunk many forests and native settlements, all in the name of cheap water supply and hydroelectricity. Also, the construction of highways, railways, and hotels has displaced many communities that hold dear to their cultural and moral traditions. But some policy makers in the government have argued that “no pain no gain,” i.e. development has collateral damages that should be accepted. This is an autocratic way of forcing the affected people to accept something against their will; their curse and retribution will come later. History is replete with records on cursed policies, projects, and buildings. Therefore, a good policy must respect places of sanctity that are much revered by some communities—in the same manner environmentalists oppose deforestation, global warming, and radioactive dumping. This is the eleventh principle in policy making, i.e. respect cultural and moral traditions of affected communities. Avoid bulldozing over the will power of people. The Arab Spring phenomenon today is a testimony of bulldozing over the people by oppressive means and policies by the ruling elites in the past. The citizenry has a tolerance limit.

Furthermore, policies must be in accordance with the laws of the land. This is the twelfth principle. Any policy that does not conform to existing constitution and laws of the land will lead to its expulsion. Policy makers must



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observe this; therefore, they must be read the laws before making conflicting policies. For example, if the constitution provides for the freedom of expression of citizens, then organizations must not simply expel people or deny services to people for the way they look. Also, if the laws prohibit segregation of students, then a university must not make policies that segregate students according to race, gender, status, or religion. Also, if the laws stipulate the special rights and privileges of some people in education, then schools and universities must abide by the laws.

Policies are never long-lasting. They are constantly being revamped or repealed from time to time. This is because policies have their shortcomings. A policy can solve some problems, but not some others. A bad policy is one that creates a lot more problems or one that ends up with disaster. This is the thirteenth principle in policy making. For example, if a university institutes a promotion policy based on the number of journal articles, then book publications, instruction of courses, student supervision, and community relations are given less priority and merit. This policy certainly leads to lesser student admission, smaller university size, downsizing of faculties and schools, higher brain drain, and lower number of graduates. The negative consequences are numerous; therefore, it is disastrous policy.

PRINCIPLES OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

After a policy has passed the policy making phase, it goes into the implementation phase. The implementers must know what to do. In the first place, they need to understand the aims, values, benefits, and concepts surrounding a policy. They also need to know the target group and the desired outcomes and consequences. And they need to know the policy action plan, strategies, mechanism, and resources. Who is responsible to provide? It is the policy makers and the policy making body who must deliver the explanation and communicate clearly to people at the ground level regarding the various aspects of policy implementation. This is the first principle in policy implementation. It cannot be assumed that the policy will be understood well by those down the line in the bureaucracy; it cannot be assumed also that the policy will be carried out well without adequate knowledge, commitment, and resources. However, in contrary, the assumptions are alive and prevalent; thus, the blame easily goes to the implementers for the failure of a policy.

People always say that a policy is good and the policy makers are wise and right, but the implementation is bad and not effective. However, the policy makers are largely accountable for making the policy implementers understand the whole gamut of a policy wagon and jargons, as well as providing resources, guidance, and supervision to the implementers. The sense of ownership must be in the policy makers and implementers. This is the second principle of policy implementation. Without this, everybody in the policy arena will simply shrug off a policy without any sense of responsibility and accountability of doing it well. It is not mine, who cares? It is not my problem.

Only with a good sense of ownership there will be the motivation and commitment to carry out a good job. Everybody has their part to contribute to success and achievement. No free riding, no sabotage, no exploitation. All involved must have a positive disposition. This is the third principle of policy implementation. This is also disposition theory, equally applicable to the policy makers as well as implementers. Their disposition must be high and positive, if not the policy is doomed to fail.



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Policy implementation is usually compounded with a lot of misunderstandings and conflicts; therefore, a general manager is necessary to command the process. The general manager must be a director or a division of a ministry who embodies ownership of a policy. The roles of the general manager are management, supervision, and monitoring. The general manager must go down the bureaucratic chair to direct and oversee the implementers. Conflicts must be resolved, a clear operational system must be put in place, and resources must be allocated accordingly. This is the fourth principle in policy implementation, i.e. the requirement for a general manager for one policy. The entire bureaucracy in a ministry or state department cannot be assumed to be the specific owner that upholds this principle. People avoid from extra work.

For example, let us say that the Ministry of Education wants to implement the 'One Student-One Sports' policy in all schools. The first question is: who is the owner and the general manager of this policy? If there is no owner and general manager, then nobody cares about implementing it; the policy document just lay on the table of many officers who just do lip service, from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy. If there is an owner and manager, then there will be a team of officers going out to meet the key implementers at the state and district levels explaining the aims, values, benefits, outcomes, strategic plan, and mechanism of a policy. The key implementers must understand the policy package and its delivery mechanism. Together the policy makers and implementers outline a workable plan of action and get the necessary resources and expertise. Together they draw up an assessment of success plan and rank the priorities involved. This is the fifth principle of policy implementation, i.e. assessment of success and priority ranking. Thus, they know what can be done, what to be done in steps, and what are the barriers. Together they present their plan of strategies and plan of work to the people at the ground level, such as teachers, clerks, technicians, and suppliers. Assignment of responsibility, resources, work, and incentives must be made properly. People have their core duties; policy implementation is an extra job for them. Their initial reaction is resistance. Overcome their resistance and make them have ownership and commitment. This is the sixth principle of policy implementation, i.e. break down resistance and get the motivation and assurance of the people at ground level.

Before a policy is to be implemented on wide scale, it is necessary for it to be pilot-tested on a small scale first. This is the seventh principle. This is a prudent step. The pilot test will reveal the probability of success, rearrange the priorities, identify the kinds and costs of resources, set up the line of communication and responsibility, and delineate the kinds of barriers and problems. A report must be written on the pilot test and submitted to the top policy makers for reassessment and judgment. If failure rate is low, costs are reasonable, and risks are small, then the policy can take off on a large scale. This is the eighth principle. Every possible step must be taken to minimize costs, barriers, and risks because the policy owner is accountable to report to the public. This is the ninth principle, the principle of accountability to the public and the tax payers. This principle is line with the concepts of transparency and reciprocity in the public domain.

When a policy is implemented on a large scale, the policy owner and general manager must enlarge their work scope and plan of action, along with the necessary resources and funds. The owner must set up several teams to work in different parts of the country. The pilot test and its results must be used as a guide. A systematic division of responsibilities, duties, resources, and incentives is much required. This is the tenth principle. In addition, a communication system should be in place to facilitate the implementation process. Checks and balances from feedbacks are necessary. This is monitoring, the eleventh principle. In many parts of the world, many policies do not have their enforcement agency; thus, monitoring by the policy owner is deemed to be vital in order to increase



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the likelihood of success. Even then, the prevalent attitudes are the hammer-and-nail metaphor—do when being asked to do. Therefore, monitoring is poorly done. Nobody likes to boss around telling people their mistakes and what should be done to rectify the mistakes. Be quiet, everything will take its own course. Planning on paper and the reality are two different spheres, very wide apart.

CONCLUSION

Policies are concerned with human needs, which are so vast and varied encompassing many aspects of life and ecology. In a collective entity called society, the fulfillment of human needs becomes complex, tedious, difficult, and sometimes volatile. The fulfillment of needs in a complex society now becomes the responsibility of the government which negotiates the priority and amount of attention to be given to different interest groups by means of policies and laws. The government is the big brother who determines who gets what and who gets how much. The opportunists tend to find loopholes in policies and laws; the free riders tend to reap benefits without contributing; the beneficiaries let people fight for them; and the activists do the fighting. This is the policy arena.

In determining and dividing the stake, a good government bases its decision and judgment on some fundamental principles such as justice, equality, harmony, happiness, stability, security, and safety. These principles are values that are instrumental to attaining the balance of liberty of the human constitution and the balance of liberty between individuals and society. Individuals can do harm to themselves and society, and otherwise. Negotiations of human needs always tend to strike at the balance.

Laws and policies have their limitations; it is the human beings themselves ultimately that should and could determine their self-balance. Gratitude and satisfaction of their self-existence and own harmony could help in finding the balance.

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