



## Actors in Decision Making and Policy Process

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### Abstract

Across the globe and from one country to the other, societies are bedevilled by myriads of problems. Indeed, such problems span all areas of human endeavours- political, socio-economic, cultural, environmental, religious and security to mention a few. Over the years, human beings, through their various governments, engage one major and potent instrument called “policy” to address and solve problems of societies and issues that are of public concern. Policy process is an intricate process involving certain actors in government as well as those outside government (who find relevance in the existence of government). These actors or participants are crucial and influential in the sub-processes of policy initiation, choices, formulation, implementation and evaluation. It is against this backdrop that this paper examined the crucial actors/participants involved in decision making and policy process. The paper also drew experiences from various administrations in Nigeria. The paper concluded that good and beneficial public policies remain a sine-qua-non to good governance. Good and well-implemented policies will drive development globally.

**Key Words:** *policy, decision-making, policy process, governance, development.*

### 1. Introduction

Across the globe and from one country to the other, societies are bedevilled by myriads of problems. These problems manifest in the political, economic, social, environmental, cultural and religious realms. One major and potent instrument which is used by various governments all over the world to solve these problems is referred to as policy. Public policy is used to address problems of societies and issues that are of public concern. Meir and Bohte (2007) defined policy as a purposive course of action followed by actors or sets of actors usually related with government on a problem or matters of public concern. Ikelegbe (2006) explained policy to mean a course of action or a programme of actions, which is chosen from among several alternatives by certain actors in response to certain problems. Once taken, it guides behaviour, activities and practices and provides a framework for present and future decisions. Policies are formulated by certain actors to achieve certain goals and they consist of certain courses of actions to be taken in certain processes.

Policy process encompasses an intricate series of smaller processes. Specifically, it entails formulation, implementation and evaluation. Consequent upon the intricacies involved, specific crucial actors play roles in the policymaking process. Anderson (1979) categorized the crucial actors in the policy-making process into two, namely: official and unofficial policymakers. The two categories of participants are involved in one way or the other in the policy process, and they are crucial and influential in the sub-processes of policy initiation, choices, formulation, implementation and evaluation.

#### Unofficial Policymakers

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 policy-making process.

#### Official Policymakers:

Accord to Anderson, the official policymakers are those who possess legal authority to engage in the formulation of public policy. Those involved in this category are the legislators, the executive, the administrators and the judiciary. Each of them performs policy-making responsibilities in a different way from the others. They are governmental actors who occupy formal public positions and political offices and serve as the actual policy makers.

Official policymakers are in turn categorized by Anderson (1979) and Egonmwan (1991) into:

- (i) primary policymakers; and
- (ii) supplementary policymakers.

The primary policymakers are constitutionally empowered to engage in the formulation of policies. It is their constitutional assignment and responsibility. Consequently, they need not depend upon other governmental agencies or units or structures to perform their policy-making roles. In Nigeria, for example, they are members of the National Assembly (the Senate and the House of Representatives) and states’ Houses of Assembly. In Nigeria’s current democratic dispensation, other significant primary policymakers include the president, his aides, administrators and judges. They, as well, contribute as supplementary policymakers.

The supplementary policymakers, expectedly, receive their authority to act in policy making process from the primary policymakers such as the National Assembly in Nigeria. They are expected to be responsive to the interests and requests of the National Assembly. Examples of supplementary policy makers are persons, agencies or bodies that need authority from others in order to act as they are dependent on, or are controlled by, others. They include ministries, departments and other governmental agencies that initiate policies and push for them.

There are politicians in the policy-making process and these refer to all elected political office holders and those who occupy political posts/offices. They include the president (as the chief executive), his political aides and advisers, legislators in the National Assembly (the Senate and the House of Representatives), and members of the states' Houses of Assembly.

## 2. The Role of the Executive in the Policy-making Process

The executive comprises the president, prime minister, premier or governor, (as the case may be), ministers, special advisers, special assistants, top political aides and the administrators. The main responsibility of the executive is to implement public policies and to supervise, coordinate and manage ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) that are involved in the implementation of policies.

But the executive in democratic dispensations, for example, the president in Nigeria plays a crucial and pivotal role in the policy-making process. Indeed, he plays dominant roles in the initiation, formulation and implementation stages of the policy process. This era is referred to as an "executive-centred era," in which the effectiveness of government depends substantially upon executive leadership both in policy formation and in policy execution. The Nigerian president's authority to exercise legislative leadership is both clearly established and accepted as a necessity to the president (Omotoso, 2010). In this "executive-centred era", the president and his chief aides and advisers in the presidency have become the major source of policy proposals initiation. It has become crystal clear that the president who gives executive leadership is also expected to provide legislative leadership. Egomwan (1991) cited the Babangida and Obasanjo administrations in which the two presidents made significant impact on policy issues. There were policy proposals on the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), privatisation programme, local government reform, new constitutions, and the Global System of Mobile Communication (GSM), to mention a few. Egomwan further observed that during the elected civilian government of the Second Republic headed by President Shehu Shagari, the National Assembly expected the president to present policy recommendations to it and provide it with draft bills containing his recommendations. The same expectation subsists till today. All these confirm that the executive president is looked upon, not only for executive leadership, but also for legislative leadership. He plays dominant roles in the policy process that transcend mere implementation because of certain glaring factors. Firstly, the president (as the chief executive) parades an array of ministers, advisers, technocrats, professionals, skilled and experienced administrators on various policy issues ranging from political, social and economic matters to foreign and military relations. Secondly, the power of the executive has been constantly increasing because of the increasing complexity of policy problems which require a high degree of professionalism and specialized knowledge to tackle. Thirdly, the legislature, which is constitutionally empowered to formulate policies, largely appears to have abdicated that constitutional responsibility to the executive. The fragmentations of the legislature and mode of operation have incapacitated them from having adequate time and the necessary cohesion to address policy matters. As a result, a good number of policy proposals (especially the sensitive ones) will have to be initiated and sponsored by the president. Fourthly, the executive has enormous funds, ample facilities and the power of patronage at its disposal to push for the acceptance and passage of its policy proposals.

In the areas of foreign and military policy, Anderson (1979) declared that presidents possess great constitutional powers and operating freedom, especially in the United States of America. Foreign policy is largely a creation of presidential leadership and action. It is to a great extent the domain of the executive, and this is the case in all nations of the world. Egomwan (1979) corroborated this assertion by declaring that in some cases, the president is an 'adopter' of any policy initiated singly by the presidency itself in its own right. He cited the example of President Babangida who donated money to a university in Sierra Leone and sent relief funds and materials to South-West People's Organisation (SWAPO) in Namibia without any recourse to the Armed Forces Ruling Council. In developing countries, the scenario is that power is more highly concentrated in the executive. As a result of this, the executive has more influence in forming public policies and in the entire policy process.

## 3. The Role of Legislators in Policymaking

Legislators are members of parliaments, for example, the National Assembly and state assemblies in Nigeria. As indicated earlier, the legislators constitute the primary policymakers. They possess direct constitutional authority to initiate and formulate policies. As elected law makers, they represent their people from their various constituencies. Consequently, they are expected to collate the views, interests, demands and problems of their constituents, harmonise them and translate them into policy proposals for the legislature. Such policy proposals are subjected to the entire legislative processes of reading, debating and scrutiny (by the relevant standing committees). Policies formulated from such proposals are then forwarded for the president's assent. Formulated policies will set up policy programmes and required actions which the executive will then implement and evaluate. Legislators do not generate and develop policy proposals from their people only. They also develop draft policies from their fellow legislators and the executive.

In reality today, legislators appear to have practically and largely abdicated their constitutional responsibility of policy making to the executive. Ikelegbe (2006) declared that legislators no longer exert considerable influence on the initiation and formulation of policies. They just (in most cases) mainly formalise and legitimize policies already formulated by the executive. They look up to the executive for legislative leadership. Certain factors are responsible for such abdication of responsibility in Nigeria. Firstly, legislators are fragmented, not only along party lines, but also along ethnic and religious lines. Consequently, they lack the necessary cohesion to generate, initiate and formulate policies that will benefit the majority of citizens. Secondly, many legislators lack the intellectual depth, professionalism, skills and technocracy needed to tackle the complex problems of modern-day societies and governance which the executive functionaries have. Thirdly, most legislators demonstrate flippancy. They have little understanding of the weight of their assignment. Basically, they are not well-positioned to meet the increasing need for expertise in governance. Fourthly, the "executive – centred era" (as manifested in the possession and deployment of enormous resources and power by the executive) has put the legislators at a great disadvantage. They are easily tempted with cash or threatened with removal

by the executive to do its bidding.

It is important to state, however, that legislators are still active in the policy-making process in developed democratic dispensations and that they play significant policy roles in the presidential system of government. They are inactive or rendered redundant in authoritarian and totalitarian regimes.

#### 4. The Role of the Judiciary in Policymaking

The judiciary comprises judges and the courts. Their constitutional responsibilities are the interpretation of the constitution and the laws, as well as adjudication in conflicts between individuals, groups, governmental institutions and the arms/levels of government. It is instructive to note that the judiciary is not constitutionally empowered to initiate, formulate or implement policies. However, through the interpretation of the constitution and laws, it contributes significantly to the policy making process. Egomwan (1991) identified four important instruments that the judiciary employs to react to policies. These instruments are:

- (a) judicial review
- (b) statutory interpretation of cases brought before the judges
- (c) cases on economic matters
- (d) judicial activism

**(a) Judicial review:** This refers to the power of courts to determine the constitutionality of the actions of the legislative and executive branches and declare them unconstitutional, null and void, and of no effect if such actions violate any section(s) of the constitution.

**(b) Statutory interpretation of cases brought before the judges:** This instrument refers to the power of courts used in interpreting and deciding the meaning of constitutional provisions which are prone to conflicting interpretations. Judges in their courts clarify constitutional provisions and whatever interpretation they give becomes binding on all parties involved.

**(c) Formulation of economic policies:** This has to do with the decisions of courts on matters like contracts, ownership of property and employer-employee relationship. When matters relating to these are brought before the courts/judges, their decisions can translate to policymaking, or policy fine-tuning, or “repolicing” altogether.

**(d) Judicial activism:** This instrument refers to the regulation of social and political activities in line with changing times. In this process, the courts specify what government cannot do and what it has to do in order to satisfy legal and constitutional obligations. Consequently, the courts can venture into, and adjudicate on, areas like the rights of individuals to social welfare services. It can also adjudicate in the operation of public institutions like schools, colleges and universities.

Through these instruments, the judiciary brings about judicial intervention which can, not only modify policies, but also redirect policy and action as well as moderate implementation activities. In a nutshell, the judiciary is that actor that ensures propriety, fairness, constitutionality, justice and moderation in the policy process.

#### 5. The Role of Administrators in Policymaking

As indicated earlier, administrators are classified as supplementary policy makers. They gain their authority from primary policy makers before they act. They are potentially dependent on the primary policy makers. Administrators work directly under the executive arm of government as they are implementers of public policy. They are present in MDAs. As political systems differ around the world, so also are administrative systems. The kind of political system in place in any nation determines the kind of administrative system, in terms of size, complexity, structure and space of autonomy. Whatever the situation, it has been clearly established that administrators, in their implementation assignment, can make or mar any policy. During implementation, they can engage in foot-dragging or non-enforcement altogether.

The role of administrators in the policy process has become so crucial, and this has transcended mere implementation of policies. Through the executive, they now generate, initiate and formulate policy proposals and push for them. Certain factors are responsible for this as enunciated by Anderson (1979):

In complex industrial societies especially, the technicality and complexity of many policy matters, the need for continuing control, and the legislators' lack of time and information, have led to the delegation of much discretionary authority, often formally recognised as rule-making power, to administrative agencies. Consequently, administrators make many decisions that have far-reaching political and policy consequences.

Thomas (1966) had earlier declared that: “It is doubtful that any modern industrial society could manage the daily operation of its public affairs without bureaucratic organisations in which officials play a major policy-making role”. From the submissions of Anderson and Thomas, we could gather that administrators' role in the policy-making process has become so crucial because societies have become complex coupled with complicated and heavily challenging social, economic and political problems. Administrators' skills, training, competence and experience in governmental tasks have put them in a vantage position to tackle policy issues. Apart from this, because they are mainly career officers, they are in good stead to ensure continuity and regulation of decisions and actions in the policy process.

Thus, political office holders continuously depend on administrators that have quality time and adequate information necessary in the policy process. In the circumstances, administrators will continue to wield considerable influence in the policy process. This is because they engage in facilitating and restricting policy choices and implementing only policies that their abilities permit. The corollary is that they implement policies that they are favourably disposed to. The technocracy, professionalism, skill and experience of administrators will continue to put them in good stead to wield enormous influence and apply their discretions in the policy process. This is underscored by the submission of Rourke (1976). He declared that:

Without administrative discretion, effective government would be impossible in the infinitely varied and rapidly changing environment of twentieth century society. But the exercise of judgement involves choice and choice means the formulation of policy. Hence the high development of administrative discretion in modern society, necessarily projects bureaucrats into the centre of the policy process.

## 6. Unofficial Policymakers

As explained earlier, the unofficial policy makers (as described by Anderson) are people who do not possess legal authority to make binding policy decisions. They 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 policymakers. They are engaged, mainly, in harnessing their interests and demands, harmonising them and influencing the official policymakers to factor these interests and demands into the policy making process. These unofficial policy makers comprise interest groups, political parties and individual citizens.

### Interest Groups

These are associations of individuals who share common interests, beliefs and aspirations regarding their demands. They are civil society organizations that advance and advocate their interests and demands with a view to influencing the policy process. Abutudu (1995) identified five such groups. The first group is made up of professional associations, labour and students such as the Nigerian Bar Association (NBA), Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), and National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). The second group consists of the human rights groups like Civil Liberties Organisation (CLO) and Committee for the Defence of Human Rights (CDHR). The third group is made up of primordial groups that struggle for state power and the national cake such as Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), Middle Belt Forum, Afenifere and Ohaneze. The fourth group comprises the business class in manufacturing, banking and finance, agriculture, mining and commerce under the umbrella of the Nigerian Chamber of Commerce. The fifth category consists of numerous groups that are voluntary in nature and essentially mutually supportive in character such as town unions and community development associations.

All these groups, according to Anderson (1979), perform an interest articulation function, that is, they express demands and present alternatives for policy actions. They may also supply public officials with much information, often of a technical sort – concerning the nature and possible consequences of policy proposals. In doing so, they contribute to the rationality of policymaking. Interest groups submit memoranda and draft policy proposals to the legislature, for example, the Nigerian National Assembly. They also mobilize the public to support their advocacy on particular policy proposals. Besides, they work through their constituencies' representatives in the National Assembly to influence the policy process. Official policy makers cannot ignore interest groups because of the large following they command and because of their good organisation and prominent activities.

### Political Parties

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. Political parties that have minority members among official policy makers try to advocate and build coalitions for factoring their party programmes into policy proposals. Apart from this, they also wield considerable influence by providing alternatives to existing policies.

### Individual Citizens

The interests and desires of common citizens are consequential for public policies (Lindblom, 1986). 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. Consequently, citizens play vital roles in the policy making process. Citizens are voters, and through the electoral process, they help to produce basic changes in public policy (Anderson, 1979). Citizens can vote out any political party or the personalities involved if they are not satisfied with their policy programmes. Thus, they can bring about discontinuity in policy programmes with their voting power.

Individual citizens with great intellectual depth and versatility can make considerable impact on policy issues and policy choices. Government cannot ignore such people in policy matters because of their intellectual skills, analytical minds, and their facts and figures. Again, there are also citizens who, themselves, have served in governmental positions and capacities. Through their experiences and exposure in government, they influence the policy process by engaging in political activism and submitting memoranda on policy issues. They also articulate their policy proposals through the media (print or electronic) and through press conferences.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

Good and beneficial public policies and decision making remain a *sine qua non* to good governance in any nation whose government is serious and focused to address and solve the present and emerging problems of societies. All actors in the policy process need to be alive to their responsibilities of formulating good and beneficial policies. Formulated policies should be faithfully implemented for the good of the generality of the people in a country. Corruption, which is a cankerworm in the implementation stage, must be confronted headlong. It is generally believed in Nigeria that most of our current policies are good, but implementation is woefully poor because of the hydra-headed problem of corruption. Policy evaluation is also fundamental as policies need to be reviewed and fine-tuned periodically, so as to ensure that they remain relevant and useful in solving the problems for which they were formulated, as well as emerging challenges.

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