**RETHINKING POLICY RESEARCH SPHERE: AN AGENDA FOR CITIZENS’ PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC POLICY MAKING PROCESS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*One major identifiable lacuna with public policy making process particularly, in the developing nations across the world has been linked to the inability of the policy making elites to establish the necessary frameworks capable of involving the citizens in the evolvement of policies which are meant to meet their desires and wellbeing. To this end, policies which ought to have the citizens as their primary focus, most times end up being at variance with the desires of the citizenry. This creates vacuums for discontentment while also rendering the relevance of policy research meaningless. This paper therefore, attempts to interrogate the place of policy research as a veritable tool in enhancing citizens’ participation towards evolving citizen-focused policy making process with the overall objective of promoting good governance, participatory democratic culture and accountability in the running of the affairs of states in the much of developing nations.*

**Keywords: Policy Research, Citizenry, Participation, Public Policy, Political Culture, Value System.**

**INTRODUCTION**

The place of policy research has been identified as one key essential element to policy making process particularly, in the evolvement of pragmatic and action-oriented outputs for resolving social problems. Perhaps, as part of the major obstacles to policy-making process, the inability of policy makers to establish an enduring nexus between what the government wants to achieve and the desires of the people has continued to impact negatively on the level of governance.

In the much of the developing countries, policies which ought to have the citizens at their centre of focus, most times are at variance with the desires of the people or are not even within those expected needs of the citizens. Thus, public policy, in most situations does not reflect the demands of the masses but rather the prevailing values of the policy makers. The argument of the inevitability of policy research could however be premised also on the argument that, for qualitatively sound policies to be evolved within the policymaking environment, there is also a necessity for an ambience of effective and participatory interactions. Many policies fail, as noted, not only because they lack the necessary support or inputs of the citizens but largely, out of that required research driven inputs that could facilitate the accurate realization of policy objectives of the government. De Vries (2007) asserts that there is need for a thorough public debate on policy making with the necessity for policy makers to interact with the policy environment. The absence of such, he avers, explains why most policies fail.

Looking at the nature and the character of the African politics, the dominance of policy-making elites in the affairs of the state and particularly, in the agenda setting mandate has been brought under scrutiny. The prevailing conditions of limited public accountability have stimulated the unchecked activities of political and bureaucratic elites in policy making processes. Public policies are often tailored towards the narrowed political interests of the political elites which are also made possible through the policy technocrats loyal to the political class. This could however, have its underlining factors in some other primordial conditions by which the policy technocrats and others who are saddled with the implementation of public policies are recruited within the machineries of the state in most of the African countries. It could be argued further that, with the prevailing conditions of the African political system, evolving a more balanced policy agenda setting within the framework of policy research sphere could be herculean unless there is a genuine commitment to the reforms of the entire political systems and by extension, the policy reform agenda. This argument becomes imperative in view of the obvious crises of governance and political representation bedeviling most countries on the African continent.

**POLICY RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND THE VALUE SYSTEM**

If value system has been conceived as the set of norms, beliefs, attributes, and habits, which help to define the societal ethical standards then, and as we have previously highlighted the essential symbiosis of political culture with policy making process in general, it could also be imperative to relate the central place of the societal level of development vis-à-vis the value system with our thematic discourse on policy research as a whole.

Arguably, policy sciences dating back from Harold Lasswell’s pioneering and groundbreaking seminal article titled ‘The Policy Orientation’ published in 1951 gave a much of insight into the emerging discipline as a multidisciplinary academic endeavour with its scope spanning the major disciplines of the social sciences such as sociology, political science, economics, as well as other allied disciplines in the humanities as philosophy, history and law. The rationale for this could however be partly located, in the centrality of development as being the major articulating focus of attention in policy studies as a whole. Importantly, other pioneering scholars of policy sciences as Herbert Simon, Charles Lindblom, David Easton and Y. Dror had equally relied on the utility of the multidisciplinary approach as a tool of analysis particularly, with their works drawing extensively from the field of sociology with emphasis on society and development.

In this context, studies on development in its multidisciplinary outlook have had the intellectual imprints of early sociologists as Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Max Weber among others with their unanimity of submissions on the argument of development as the end product of fundamental transformation and as equally induced by the ‘’value system’’ (Onuah, 2007). Our point of departure here is on the emphasis of the relationship between policy research as well as development and value system.

With reference to Durkheim (1984), development entails the organization of the society starting from the traditional stage through the organic stage in the movement from the individualistic level of societal relations to the organic and more complex organization based on division of labour. By this, the societal value system witnessed the movement in its development with the introduction of division of labour which ultimately brings about prosperity, increased in demands and production and improved welfare of the people (Webster, 1984).

Max Weber (1971) advocated the rational ethos of spirit of capitalism which emphasizes a new value system that replaces the old, rigid and unquestioned conventions of the past and their negative implications for society growth, increased productivity, consumer satisfaction and development at large. Talcott Parsons (1951) also bears his mind on the circulation or the movement of the societal value system in what he referred to as opposing or dichotomous variables that is, from particular to universal values, from ascription to achievement values, from self orientation to collective orientation, and from specific to diffuse functional values (cited in Onuah, 2007). The sociological explications here also mark the inextricable connection between societal values and the socio-economic and political transition in which the society experiences in bringing about the overall development. The implications of these for policy research and citizens’ participation are quite obvious and enormous. While it is also evident that the transition witnessed by the society in all of these movements had the involvement of the groups in the society, the resultant changes with the phases of transition in themselves were also reflective of the import of how various groups in the society organize themselves too in achieving the overall objectives of the society through policy change and transition.

Similarly, in the contention of the modernization theories, the central place of the value system has been identified to exist in the process of evolving impactful socio-economic and political development in the society. Onuah (2007) further argues that, in the sphere of political development, value system plays dominant role in explaining and providing the needed structures for democracy in terms of stability and orderly change, equality and political plurality, all of which are also indispensable to achieving any meaningful economic development.

However, because of the sustained argument and the fact of the value system of the society being inextricably tied to the character and quality of leadership and the nature of the state, this also reinforces the contention of those conditions being very prevalent in most of the countries in Africa. For instance, the character of leadership in most African countries reflect much of autocratic and dictatorial system with little or no regard for the rule of law. Such tendencies have made politics in Africa to be susceptible to all forms of manipulation where the winners take all and with the assured consequences for political crisis and instability. Looking further into the nature and the character of the African politics, Ake (2000) observed that leadership in Africa has been able to sustain these tendencies by ensuring the total control of the state and its apparatuses with the attendant consequences for the state inability to maintain cohesion among groups within the society.

Consequently, under the prevailing conditions of the uninspiring and poor leadership profile and the nature of state in much of the African countries, policy making process and the efforts in such direction appear to be at variance due to these embedded contradictions. And as noted elsewhere, policy actions of the state tend to reflect the desires and the aspirations of the dominant political class rather the interests of the general public. State policies continue to ensure the sustenance of the status quo order while public resources meant for the socio-economic well being of the citizens are in most cases diverted into the personal accounts of the political leaders due to the defective mechanisms for checking leadership actions and activities.

Similar to our discourse on the impact of value system on policy making process aside the challenges of growing social indiscipline and the defective mechanism for moderating the activities of the policy makers and political leaders, is that of policy environment. The policy environment as an integral determining factor in policy making, explains the ecological indices by which sometimes public policies are determined. Sambo (2008) asserts the peculiarities of the policy environment in the developing countries and the ways those peculiarities affect the discharge of the policy making function in these countries. And in the context of our further analysis of the efficacy of public policies, Sambo (Ibid) also clarifies that the question of the objective realities which confront policy makers in the course of seeking policy choices.

Imperatively, these questions have been premised on Claude Ake’s theoretical assumptions of human beings (including the policy makers) as being largely products of their environment; and by the compelling factor of such given realities, they cannot act in a vacuum. It is also assumed that, within the given situations, the environment will continue to have influence in shaping their values, preferences, attitudes and behaviour (Ake, 1981: 22, 23). Many empirical policy actions are abound particularly, in Nigeria to validate the above theoretical assumptions most especially, given the dynamics of the Nigerian political system and the peculiar primordial conditions with which the Nigerian political actors are sometimes predisposed.

**CITIZENS’ PARTICIPATION, GOOD GOVERNANCE AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY RESEARCH**

Relying on David Easton theoretical models of *‘’ The System Theory’’* (1953) and ‘*’Analysis* *of* *Political* *System’’* (1965), the necessity of citizens’ engagement can be better understood within the framework of policy making environment, given the realities of the system theory as a dominant paradigm in the policy analysis literature. Easton sees the society as a political system where there is a system of interaction through which binding and authoritative allocations are made. Public policy therefore, is the response of the political system to demands brought to request on it from the environment.

The very assumption of the political system responding to its environment coupled with the forces generated from the environment are pointers to the germane issues of citizens engagement and its implications for policy making process. The forces generated from the environment are specifically referring to those demands and the supports usually made on the government by individuals and groups seeking authoritative allocations of values from the government. In terms of demands, these could also be about the specific needs and desires of individuals and groups in the society from the government while, support comprises of those actions rendered in the form of *civic* duties and obligations to the government.

Further to our interrogation of the imperative of citizens’ engagement in policy research sphere, the need to establish the nexus of connectivity of such in line with the concept of good governance is not only imperative for our robust intellectual examination in this context. And quite also in line with the concept of good governance, enhancing the scope of citizens’ engagement and as argued previously, on the pivotal place of value system on policy making, the primary focus of the concept of good governance is also on the inculcation of new ethics and values which in all, guarantee a much more open and accountable government.

For instance, in a more far reaching position on the necessity of promoting good governance and enhancing popular participation of citizens in all democratic system, the World Bank submits that:

governance is a continuum and not necessarily unidirectional: it does not automatically improve overtime. It is a plant that needs constant tending. Citizens need to demand good governance. Their ability to do so is enhanced by literacy, education and employment opportunities. Governments need to prove responsive to those demands. Neither of these can be taken for granted. Change occurs sometimes in response to external or internal threats. It also occurs through pressures from different interest groups, some of which may be in the form of populist demands. Although lenders and aids agencies and other outsiders can contribute resources and ideas to improve governance, for change to be effective it must be rooted firmly in the societies concerned and cannot be imposed from the outside ( World Bank, 1992).

One significant point of reference that could be drawn from the above is that, there is changing paradigm to governance and the way governments must be constructed as attested to even by the growing global concerns. The concerns of the international donor agencies and development partners on the methodologies of construction so to say, on how contemporary governance system should be built centre on the emergence of a pluralist society and a democratic order. Basu (2012) further suggests that, the other connotations of ‘’governance’’ can be seen in the widening the scope of public administration to include informal, non state actors and other civil society groups. The importance of such informal and non state actors have also opened up and enlarged the scope of governance, policy making and other state activities that serve the public interests without necessarily involving the governmental bureaucracy. The height of this development could be also be identified with the scales of the activities of the non state actors in the recent times whereby, with the support of the international donor agencies and development partners, there seems to be an increased level of awareness and participation of the citizenry in all matters of public interest and concern. Non state actors as the civil rights organizations for instance, have greatly impacted in their continuous engagements of the citizenry towards improving the political landscape and enhancing the governance profile of the Nigerian fledgling democratic project through mass mobilization and awareness on issues such as voters’ education, freedom of information with particular emphasis on popularizing the FOI Act 2011, the service delivery charter (SERVICOM) as a new public service philosophy of improving on the delivery of public goods and services, the power sector reforms and its associated regulatory failures and on other critical issues relating to participatory governance and civic obligations and duties in Nigeria.

However, given the political trajectories of the Nigerian state as a post authoritarian nation and its chequered history of a long period of military interregnum, policy making system has been marked by the ecological and political dynamics which have also in many ways altered the level of citizens’ interest and participation in public issues. Prior to the current democratic rule in 1999, the Nigerian state was under the control of the military dictatorship where policies and actions of the government were dictated by military fiat and decrees. The absence of an elected legislative organ of the state equally provided an unfettered ground for the successive military governments through what could be likened to as ‘’elite circulation’’ of its officers in constituting themselves into the law making, law implementing and even sometimes law interpreting organs of the government. Military decrees were enacted, interpreted and enforced at will without any regard for the institution of the judiciary. The highpoint of these and their implications for policy making in Nigeria also witnessed a somewhat of impositions of policies usually at variance with public demands. These were explainable on the same ground of the very nature and the character of the military autocratic rule as one with little or no regard for the dignity of the citizens.

By the advent of the democratic rule in 1999, the policy making environment however witnessed a new lease of life because of the structural changes brought upon by the new political configuration of the civil rule. There are elected legislative bodies across the three tiers of government complimenting the policy making procedures and thereby, giving the semblance of a participatory governance. By implications too, the citizenry feels more engaged and continually have their pulses felt in government policies. The period also had the high involvement of several non state actors such as the rights advocacy groups who had become deeply active at the turn of the return to civil rule and the demilitarization projects in the country. The rights advocacy groups not only became active but they serve as policy agenda setting organs whereby, citizens’ interests are galvanized towards the policies of the government.

Imperatively, citizens’ participation in governance entails the active involvement and inclusion of the general masses and other critical stakeholders in the various stages of policy making. Modern democratic governance, going by Karl Deutsch time orientation postulation, also validates the argument of the necessity of inclusiveness and openness as the key component in the construction of any modern government. The level at which the citizens are involved in the policy making process could also determine the level of the openness and inclusiveness at which such government operates to the benefit and interest of the people. Supporting this argument further Ikpe (2008) while making some allusions to the Citizens’ Theory of democracy, also posits that the ordinary citizens are the objects of political participation, and that no overt or covert attempts should be made to restrict their level of and range of participation. Examining this further, Dennis Thompson (1970), citizenship refers to the present and future capacity for influencing politics; it hinges directly on active involvement in political life. However, the emphasis on the term ‘’politics’’ should be taken beyond its prima facie meaning and such should also add the active involvement of the citizens in all matters which border on public interests including public policy making process.

Often times too, because of the overbearing effects of government policies on the activities of sectoral interest groups, the need for articulating such sectoral interests could be very necessary in the formulation of government policies generally. Sectoral interest groups such as the manufacturers’ associations, the chambers of commerce and industry, the agricultural and agro allied associations and even the professional associations such as the engineering, legal, medical and allied fields professionals, the academia and such other relevant professional bodies have been known to have had meaningful impacts in the formulation of government policies and particularly, in their far reaching implications for the concerned sectors and the interest groups and the nation in general.

On the contrary too, particularly under unfriendly political environment, government policies have not only suffered setbacks in meeting with their targeted objectives but also in getting the necessary supportive environment for their successes on the account of the absence of such sectoral and interest groups supports. With reference to the IMF loan debate which ultimately culminated in the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) under General Ibrahim Babangida military government, the import of extending the level of citizens’ engagement beyond the involvement of the ordinary citizens became a vital prism through which government policies and their formulation could be well accentuated. Aside the general uprisings which trailed the IMF loan debate and that of the adoption of SAP at the time, the greater inputs of the key sectoral interests and professional groups provided much relevance to the utility of policy engagement beyond the ordinary citizenry. The necessary inputs of such relevant professional -interest groups have equally provided the needed expertise and the informed opinions required in the formulation and implementation of government policies. In fact, a noticeable gap which has served as the major impediment to successes of policy making and implementation mostly in Nigeria could be located in the improper engagement of critical stakeholders at the very point of conceiving policies generally. However, one factor which may be responsible for such improper consultation particularly in countries like Nigeria could be much linked sometimes, to the usually hostilities that exist between the government and some of these professional-interest groups

The environment of hostilities between policy makers and the critical stakeholders has come to define the nature of policy making process in most countries particularly in African where there is still much of the primacy of authoritarian tendencies in the running of the affairs of the state. Critical stakeholders are often bypassed and sometimes deliberately ignored at the inception of policy making process. This scenario therefore, creates an undemocratic situation of the unilateral imposition of policy-decision outcomes on the critical stakeholders even on subject matters of vital interest to the affected stakeholder groups. Looking at some of the policy-decisions of the present civilian administration of President Muhammadu Buhari just as with those of the successive governments, one could also identify such dispositions in terms of lack of consultation even on policies which could have adverse effects on the activities and operations of such interest groups or stakeholders. For instance, many critical stakeholders including some members of the Nigerian Manufacturers Association (MAN) had frowned at the decisions of the federal government on the closure of the Nigerian land borders without adequate consultation on the possible consequences of such unilateral policy-actions on the organized private sector of the Nigerian economy whose products are mostly exported into the neighbouring countries of the West African sub-region.

**CONCLUSION**

Having identified the absence of consultation and most significantly, the engagement of the citizens and other critical stakeholders as the major lacunae to policy making process particularly, in the developing democracies, the search for a new focus in that context should however, be the primary focus of any policy research agenda. In doing this, the motivating factor for policy research agenda should also be predicated on some of the highlighted issues earlier raised in this paper. Needless to remark here that the political trajectories of many countries in the much of the African continent had not been quite in alignment with the required democratic criteria even in the wake of the wind of democracy and the post cold war unipolar international system of the 1990s. Such hostile and unfavourable political situations could however, not inspire the right environment for citizens’ engagement in the affairs of the state. Political systems akin to authoritarian and personal rules of the formative and post-independent years still remain dominant in spite of the new democratic credentials of most African countries, where people voices do not count in government policy actions. Elections as democratic processes equally remain highly contentious with some African countries still enmeshed in the web of political quagmires and undemocratic practices. Incidences of sit-tight leadership syndrome, stifling of the opposition parties and their candidates during and after elections with other unwholesome electoral practices as rigging and alterations of election results in the favour of ruling parties, and resort to violence during elections assuming a dimension of political norm in some of the countries in Africa.

Arguably, the prevailing economic conditions of the African countries in the 1990s brought to the fore, the compelling need for some forms of structural adjustment in the socio-political and economic policies of some of these countries thereby, calling for the attentions of the Western capitalist consortium with their interventionist policies. Aside the conditional economic interventions of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) and such other policies aimed at deemphasizing the state ownership of public utilities and divestment of government stakes in those critical sectors of the economy, the interventions of the Western capitalist consortium and their donor agencies equally provoked some radical political measures with the inspiration of multiparty democracy and in some other cases too, programmes of transition to civil rules in countries previously dominated by military autocracy, one party system and elongated personal rules across Africa. But good as some of these Western donors’ intervention measures appeared, there were also discontents arising from lack or inadequate consultations with the large segments of the population as regard most of the policy prescriptions particularly, the widely imposed Structural adjustment Programmes (SAP) across Africa.

There is therefore the need to reinvent Africa’s home grown agenda of socio-economic and political development as symbolized by the NEPAD initiative (New Partnership for African Development) and its accompanied mechanism of peer review (APRM) otherwise known as the African Peer Review Mechanism, might become very necessary as a wholesome continental approach to promoting transparency and good governance. The NEPAD initiative, as rightly conceived, is premised on the assumption that democracy, respect for human rights, peace and good governance are conditions for development.

The civil society organisations as agents of mobilization must also live up to their mandate of not only engaging the citizenry but as the voice of the voiceless in the society. The need to reawaken the consciousness of the people most especially at the grassroots level of the society should be taken beyond the façade of political participation. Participatory governance however, should be seen as a more encompassing civic obligation of the citizens. The necessity of articulating citizens’ opinions should serve not only in the interests of the political class but in the overall wellbeing of the society. Hyden (1997) argues that active citizens’ participation is necessary for the organization and functioning of development activities while communication of information and ideas is needed to encourage participation and to guard against the abuses of state power. Part of such abuses of state power, is the situation in which policies are designed to suit the interests of the ruling elites as against the interests of the entire citizenry (Adewunmi: 2007). If policy research has been identified as a means of measuring the impacts of government policies on the citizenry, then, it could also be inferred that the level at which the citizens are also engaged in the process of formulating and implementing such should also be of premium priority to government. This is not only a necessary paradigm to achieving inclusiveness within the political space but a further step towards promoting transparency and good governance.

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