

# Formulating sustainable policies to accelerate service delivery

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## ABSTRACT

*Government policy is the springboard from which all government activity takes place. Policy does not take place in a vacuum, but is usually the result of a need, or perceived need, that originates in society as a whole. When the needs are articulated by society, interest groups and individuals, government is obliged to respond positively where practically possible. When a need has been identified it is incumbent on government to formulate policies to address such a need, and such policies must be sustainable. A sustainable policy will work towards the creation of a healthy environment, equitable society and a sustainable economy. A policy should be regarded as a framework or guideline for achieving specific outputs and outcomes. It should impact positively on the environment and improve or maintain the quality of life of citizens, now and in the future, thereby strengthening the economy in the long-term. The formulation of a policy requires the exploration of issues that need to be dealt with from different perspectives or dimensions. The article argues that within a developmental state such as South Africa, there is an urgent need for government to formulate sustainable policies that will ultimately accelerate service delivery in the local government sphere. Further, the article contends that formulating sustainable policies requires an integrated approach from all spheres of government and various stakeholders, including political functionaries, leading public officials, and interest/pressure groups. These institutions and people cannot play a central role in policy formulation if adequate information relevant to policy is not available.*

## INTRODUCTION

Better policies and programmes can be designed if the issue and the possible solutions are looked at through a sustainable development *lens*. The article explains the concepts of policy, policy-making and policy formulation and links this to classical public administration theory. It also examines the need to formulate sustainable policies, and analyses policy coherence and integration at the local government sphere in South Africa.



## RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODOLOGY

The research problem is about how an integrated policy approach can be a mechanism towards a responsive and responsible government within a developmental state. The methodology used is a desk-top analysis of existing research into policy-making and formulation and participation mechanisms for sustainable policies. A new democratic space for a community to participate in policy-making requires methodology that is inclusive of all stakeholders. This is also suggested by the following explanations of concepts.

## EXPLAINING POLICY, POLICY-MAKING AND POLICY FORMULATION

Policy is a set of decisions taken by a political actor or group concerning the selection of goals and the methods of attaining them, and these decisions should be within the power of the policy-maker to achieve (Harris 1990:161). According to Fox and Meyer (1996:96), policy is a guide to action, or statement of goals that should be followed in an institution in order to deal with a particular problem or phenomena. Policy is a general statement that guides decision-making in an organisation (Smit and Cronje 1990:123). Policy may be regarded as a norm or norms laid down by an authority or authorised body or person to engender actions for the realisation of objectives (Hattingh 1998:55).

Policy-making involves the making of decisions about the directions in which change should occur (Brynard in Bekker 2004:132). Brynard (2006:358) states that policy-making is generally initiated when someone perceives that a problem exists in society.

Policy formulation is the development and synthesis of alternative solutions for policy problems (Fox and Meyer 1996:97). Van der Waldt and Du Toit (2007:279) contend that in the formulation phase of a policy, forecasts can be made to consider the estimated impact, advantages and costs of policy alternatives.

South Africa has undergone a major transition to democracy. This transformation has brought underlying changes in the lives of South African citizens. It is the dawn of democracy that has led South Africa to adopt a wide range of policies that is reshaping the social, economic and political landscape. In this way national policy needs to be informed by a social-development approach which warrants public participation (Perold *et al.* 2008:57).

A policy formulation that is responsive to communities' needs requires substantive participation from all stakeholders. According to Beschel and Manning (2006:83), a government will not survive for long if its administration remains the responsibility of one individual, and since policy formulation addresses underlying decisions, it might not be easy for an individual to manage. Though the involvement of all participants is recommended, it is evident that not all participants are able to contribute to policy formulation. For this reason a mechanism to select stakeholders across different groups should be put in place ([www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)).

In the policy formulation arena, South Africa is required to involve communities and other relevant stakeholders. In so doing, government will be able to formulate a strong policy that is more responsive to communities' needs. This exploration is based on the strong belief that citizens have the right to be involved and to contribute to the decision-making process

that impact on their lives. The creation of space for community in democratic government for policy deliberation is of vital importance (Buccus and Hicks 2006:155). This is in contrast to the classic public administration theory.

## **CLASSICAL PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION THEORY**

Public service bureaucracies surfaced in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a period typified by fast change linked to the industrial revolution. A credible, well-trained public service was an influential tool for promoting economic development and building a modern state. It contributed immensely to the success of countries undergoing industrialisation (Bourgon 2007:9).

The classic model was founded, based on a number of principles, including a strict separation of political and professional activities, public service anonymity and political neutrality. The public service was governed by specific, prescribed rules and was accountable to elected political office bearers; it was expected to exercise minimal caution in performing its tasks. It valued and encouraged impartiality, compliance and predictability (Bourgon 2007:9).

The public service, as currently known, owes much to the public administration theory that prevailed at the beginning of the twentieth century including:

- a commitment to serve the public good;
- respect for the rule of law; and
- an expectation that public servants would exhibit integrity, probity and impartiality in serving the public trust (Van der Waldt *et al.* 2002:189-190; Davis in Bovaird and Loffler 2004:219; Bourgon 2007:9).

## **Role of politics in policy-making**

One of the fundamental principles of the classic public administration theory holds that politicians make policy decisions, which public servants must implement. According to Bourgon (2007:10-11) and Van Niekerk *et al.* (2002:90), this separation of politics and policies is necessary for several reasons. One is to prevent political interference in the implementation of public policies as a means of avoiding corruption and patronage. As an equally important counterbalance, this approach prevents government bureaucracy, which undermines democracy. In practice, the separation of policy and politics has always been difficult.

Public policies are much more than a simple statement of political will. They are the means by which government and society strive to achieve a desired public outcome. In the current era, the search for the best public policy options often involves an increasingly complex process of interactions inside and outside of government. Bourgon (2007:11) contends that political will is in no way diminished through this dialogue. The final decision, however, still rests with elected political office bearers who decide whether a new policy is deserving of public support and whether initiatives deserve to form part of the government agenda. Through experience, governments have come to accept that this approach



increases the likelihood of success, reduces the risks of unintended outcomes and facilitates implementation.

Public servants play a critical role in this process. They have an essential responsibility to contribute to constructive policy analysis, to identify workable policy options and to gauge the impact of various policy choices. Within these functions, they are called upon to *speak truth to power* and to provide *fearless advice*. The role of public servants therefore realises its true meaning through this interaction with elected officials engaged in the difficult process of policy formulation (Kuye *et al.* 2002:82; Bayat in Fox *et al.* 2006:107).

The argument put forward by Bourgon (2007:11) is that the public policy issues of the twenty-first century are increasingly becoming more difficult and will require even more interaction including:

- interactions among public servants in local, national and international organisations – to exchange information and to assemble the best available evidence in support of policy decisions;
- interactions between public servants and elected officials at all levels – to consider the impact of different policy options; and
- interactions between elected political office bearers and citizens who claim a more prominent voice in the policy decisions that will most affect them in the future (Bourgon 2007:11).

The above requires a government response which is in line with citizens' expectations.

## **PUBLIC POLICY AND GOVERNMENT RESPONSE**

Currently no government can claim to have all the tools or the powers necessary to solve complex policy challenges. Government is an important player, but one that must work with others to shift society in a particular direction. Increasingly, government's role is to set the agenda, bring the proper players to the table, and to facilitate sustainable solutions to public challenges (Bourgon 2007:20; Fox 2010:84).

The modern policy process is characterised by a distribution of power and responsibility. This is because global markets have given rise to new issues of public concern requiring global solutions; governments must increasingly work with other governments and many international organisations; and technology enables greater public access to the public policy process. Brynard (2009:312) contends that the content of policy in a democracy determines the kind of social and political activity that will be stimulated by the policy-making process.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has studied various forms of citizens' involvement in policy development and defines the primary characteristics of three common approaches:

- Information: A one-way relationship in which governments provide information to citizens.
- Consultation: A two-way relationship in which citizens provide feedback to governments.
- Active participation: An ongoing exchange in which governments and citizens are involved in the content of policy-making (Bourgon 2007:20).

**Figure 1 Towards a New Public Administration theory: public policy**

Factors	From	Towards
Policy/Administration interface	Separation	Interaction
Public policy	The result of political decision process	The result of multiple interactions
Citizens' role	Compliance	Engagement
Role of government	Legislation	Deliberation

Source: Bourgon (2007:21)

As the process of policy development changes, the role of government, of elected office bearers and of public servants changes. These changes add complexity to the policy-administration relationship as depicted in Figure 1:

Government will continue to play the key role in setting the legal and political rules of governance, and ensuring that the principles of democracy and social justice are respected. Public servants are called upon to play new roles of facilitation, negotiation and conflict resolution (Bourgon 2007:21). This demands sustainable policy-making.

## SUSTAINABLE POLICY-MAKING

A sustainable policy is a building block of sustainability. It will improve or maintain the quality of life of those impacted now and in the future and will strengthen the economy in the long-term. According to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) (2009) this has three elements: a sustainable policy simultaneously works towards a healthy environment, a fair society and a sustainable economy; it is a policy that considers long-term results and will be contributing to those goals in the following two years, five to ten years' time, and beyond; and it must be developed and implemented through good participative governance.

The question is why think about sustainable policy-making. The following are five reasons why adopting a sustainable policy approach can support better policy-making ([www.defra.gov.uk/sustainable/policy/why.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/sustainable/policy/why.htm)):

- Value for money: Sustainable policies are cost-effective because they provide true long-term value for money.
- Resilient: A more sustainable policy will be better equipped and more flexible in a future that will be different from the present.
- Effective delivery: A policy that adheres to sustainable development principles is more likely to succeed and must be based on the principles of good governance.
- Champion: Government, at all spheres, must lead by example to encourage others and to play their part in creating a sustainable future.
- Easy impact assessments: It helps to communicate the benefits of policy-making and it is useful for presenting options to ministers or senior officials (Bryner in Peters and Pierre 2007:192).



Sustainable policies have outputs, outcomes and impacts (Harris 1990:178). Policy outputs can be measured, for example, by the number of roads built and the number of patients cured. Policy outcomes are more long-term and are concerned with the quality of schools, the levels of technology in hospitals and the prospects for a decline in infant mortality. Policy impacts might relate to the long-term effect of policies; for example, on trading patterns or the *war* on drugs.

## **Need to formulate sustainable policies**

The following events, pressures and essential changes have resulted in the re-focus of public policy management to address citizens' needs (Van der Waldt *et al.* 2002:176-177):

*Policy development (or formulation)* was initially the sole function of the public service. Due to the increasing complexity of societal problems, a number of important role-players, like international organisations, the private sector, academics and civil society, have become increasingly involved in public policy management. This has impacted on the organisational culture of public institutions. Furthermore, there is a formal departure from formulating and managing the policy based solely on traditional, legal and rational viewpoints of public policy (Eliassen and Sitter 2008:104).

*The needs, demands and desires of the consumers of public policy* (communities) have changed and thus require different ways of involvement. Citizens, as clients or customers of government and as consumers of government services/products, demand improved quality of public services. This necessitates the development of new ways of addressing such demands. The policy management structures and systems are expected to be accountable, accessible and answerable to a wider public. This has resulted in the introduction of more checks and balances regarding the allocation and management of scarce resources. The involvement of ordinary citizens in the successful transformation of the South African system of government can be regarded as a manifestation of the powerful role citizens can play in influencing government policy-making.

*Globalisation* has introduced changes in many countries, including South Africa, and these have impacted on policy management in these countries. The collapse of command control economics and the increased technological development in areas such as electronic commerce have had a direct impact on policy processes. The strategies for downsizing (right sizing) the public service and decentralising the functions of government to lower levels have had an important effect on the way in which public policies are formulated (Roux 2002:421).

## **Democratic participation in policy-making**

Peters and Pierre (2007:193-194) argue that democratic participation in administrative policy-making and implementation ranges from minimal involvement in public hearings and meetings to collaborative decision-making. Here stakeholders are authorised to make proposals that can gain agreement among participation. Collaboration aims to avoid problems that have plagued other planning processes, and provides a forum for government officials from different spheres of government and overlapping jurisdictions to work together. (See also Booysen in Venter and Landsberg 2006:172-173). Participation

in policy issues derives its principles from the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996*, which mandates government to encourage the involvement of communities and civic organisations in governance. This is to accord citizens a right to participate in a country's affairs.

Stakeholders like businesses, unions and non-governmental organisations should participate with government representatives in commissions responsible for developing and implementing policies (OECD 2006:5). Interviews and a policy discussion session with local government policy-makers reveal that several mechanisms have been put in place to facilitate community-based involvement in municipal decision-making (Van Donk *et al.* 2008:528). The stakeholders were unanimous in their views that engaging citizens in policy-making brings benefit to all.

## **Challenges and civil society experiences of policy-making process**

Though there are legislative provisions for communities to participate in governance, there are critical challenges for communities and other relevant stakeholders to participate in policy-making processes. These, amongst others, comprise design, capacity and resource gaps which impact on the effectiveness of the measures put in place. Some of these challenges emanate from the political system of proportional representation, which undermines the concept of citizen representation (Buccus and Hicks 2005:156).

Buccus and Hicks (2005:157) point out that participatory policy-making is seen as an *elite-driven process*. In this regard, the majority of people tend to be excluded from participating in policy-making processes. Further, community participation in provincial legislatures is compromised by the insufficient time given for legislators to consult critical components of policy-making, i.e. community, interest groups, functionaries and other relevant stakeholders. The language versions of policy and legislation are not simplified, and this stifles effective participation in policy-making processes, especially for historically-disadvantaged groups (Buccus and Hicks 2005:158).

It might be argued that there are spaces for civil society and other stakeholders to engage in policy-making processes. The irony of this is that access to these spaces is only accessible to a few. It sidelines many and particularly the most marginalised groups. Moreover, the actions to facilitate community input are somehow superficial and fail to tap into the real power base where decisions are taken. Most processes just present predetermined positions and programmes for limited feedback and information. In this respect, creating space for communities to participate could make a contribution to policy-making processes (Buccus and Hicks 2005:158-159). In municipalities, however, attempts have been made to formulate coherent and integrated policies.

## **POLICY COHERENCE AND INTEGRATION IN THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT SPHERE**

Mechanisms to promote policy coherence in the local government sphere have emerged (Harrison in Harrison *et al.* 2003:20). An example is the South African Integrated Development Plan (IDP), which has similarities to a range of other international practices





including integrated planning and performance monitoring in New Zealand; integrated area planning in Europe; and the multi-sectoral investment planning promoted by the United Nations Development Programme. In recent years the concept of policy coherence and integration has emerged as an alternative to the *command and control* mechanisms of the past. Policy coherence essentially involves the integration of agendas among separate agencies and common programming across sectors (Harrison in Harrison *et al.* 2003:19, and Gilling 2007:52). The requirement to establish the IDPs represents a fundamental departure from previous local authority governance and planning practices. It is now commonly accepted that the previous local government structures were extremely closed, bureaucratically-dominated institutions.

Geldenhuis (in Bekker 2004:20) argues that in the local government sphere the most important power is to formulate policy. Some policies in the local government sphere, however, are confined in their social impact. Some were made primarily by bureaucrats with little or even no contribution from councillors, despite affecting the lives of the residents of a specific town or city.

Generating successful policy implementation suggests co-operation, and perhaps co-ordination, among interdependent actors in the face of obstacles (Peters and Pierre 2007:145). Van Donk *et al.* (2008:5) maintain that the entrenchment and extension of the expansive policy ambition for local government during the last few years means that the policy scope of municipalities remains broad and all-encompassing, especially when compared to many international contexts in the developmental state.

Policy integration means that national strategies should give consideration to environmental, economic and social concerns in integrated approaches contained in national plans and reports. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2006:3), the ultimate goal is policy coherence, i.e. ensuring that policies in different areas do not conflict with or undermine each other. Further, provincial and local authorities should be fully involved in the development of national policy strategies, with certain delivery aspects devolved to sub-national levels. The objective of integration is inclusivity as illustrated by the following case study on housing policy.

## **CASE STUDY IN HOUSING POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

The need for a new housing policy was one of the most pressing concerns in post-1994 South Africa. In the initial development and implementation of the housing policy from 1994 to 2000, issues included approaches to stabilising the housing environment, mobilising housing credit and savings, and subsidisation to improve the affordability of housing (Booyesen in Venter and Landsberg 2006:189). The objectives of South Africa's post-1994 housing policy can be seen as a network of interrelated processes, aimed at undoing the complex legacies of past settlements, and proactively offering affordable and dignified housing to huge segments of the population. The 1996 Constitution, the Reconstruction and Development Programme, the Urban Development Strategy and the Urban Development Framework are policies that highlight housing as a priority in South Africa (Irurah and Boshoff 2003:257).



## Policy implications

Fox *et al.* (1991:318) argue that the problems of poverty, growth and inequality in a developmental state should be addressed by a package of complementary and supportive policies that include three basic elements:

- a policy to provide for market or institutionally-established prices that correct price distortions so as to give the correct signals and incentives to producers and resource suppliers;
- a policy to bring about far-reaching structural changes in the distribution of assets, power and access to education and associated income-earning or employment opportunities; and
- a policy to modify the size distribution of income through progressive taxation, the transfer of payment to people at the lower levels and expanded provision of publicly-provided consumption goods and services.

According to Botes *et al.* (1992:313) no activity of government can be launched without laying down a clear, written policy. They argue that while the aims of public institutions are usually fixed and rigid on a long-term basis, the associated policy should continuously be tested against changing circumstances to determine whether the policy still meets the requirements. Policy is the direction to be followed to attain specific aims.

## CONCLUSION

To realise the vision of a responsive and responsible government, policy-making cannot occur in isolation from the citizenry. A number of actors ought to impact on the policy endeavours of the country. South African legislative institutions should strive to acquire maximum inputs from various policy stakeholders who will be affected by policy decisions. Policies formulated should not only be effective and efficient, but should also take into account the needs, desires, morals and values of the general public. This article has argued that adapting to sustainable policies is a challenge for the society as a whole, and will require action from a range of individuals and organisations across sectors, and not government alone. This requires that government has to provide leadership by making evidence and information available. It will also have to contribute to and encourage partnerships and stakeholder-led action at national, provincial and in local spheres.

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