The primary focus of this article is the nature of the societal problem requiring policy intervention. Correct diagnosis of the problem is essential for successful policy implementation. There is a lack of certainty about and knowledge of the underlying nature of the social processes involved in the generation of policy disorders. This article attempts to address the very issues involved with the nature of the policy problem and related aspects. The problem situation does not necessarily present the policy maker with a clear-cut picture. The policy maker is, on the contrary, confronted with blurred pictures, where almost nothing is easily determined. In South Africa there is furthermore a complicated network of related policy problems. The example of the Child Support Grant (CSG) that is cited in this article exhibits all the dimensions of a policy problem. The problem of poverty in general is evidenced by certain indicators. Child poverty is therefore only one aspect of poverty in society and child care in turn, is one aspect of policy measures to address child poverty.

### Introduction

One of the many reasons for disorders in public policy making and policy implementation is the difficulty of making accurate diagnoses of policy problems. However, the exact determination of the policy problem is crucial for the decision about whether to intervene or not, and if so, how to intervene. It is then the responsibility of the politicians and policy makers to make the correct estimation about the nature of the disorder and the likelihood that an effective remedy is available. This is quite a challenge with respect to normal personal problems, but is even more so for the policy maker confronted with societal problems. There is a lack of certainty about and knowledge of the underlying nature of the social processes involved in the generation of policy disorders. This article attempts to address the very issues involved with the nature of the policy problem and related aspects.
Social problems and phenomena are complex, varied and dynamic. Serious societal problems involving persons or groups are usually unclear, ill defined, complex and unstructured. Understanding about the root basis of their solution is not necessarily obvious. Ideas surrounding what a solution is, how it may be developed and if developed, how it will be evaluated, are vague and/or ambiguous. The problem situation does not necessarily present the policy maker with a clear-cut picture. The policy maker is, on the contrary, confronted with blurred pictures, where almost nothing is easily determined. Solutions based on ad-hoc policies, disjointed and heuristic measures, pre-set conceptual orientations, ideological considerations and statistical data ignoring soft information (i.e., subjective images, attitudes and meanings), not only fail to deal with problems effectively, but also worsen them. This is especially the case in the present day and age where several complex linkages among policy problems exist. This article explores the nature of the policy problem, starting with the sensing of the problem, leading to the definition and diagnosis thereof and eventually the policy formulation as a remedy for societal ailments.

**RESEARCH PROBLEM**

The problem addressed in this article is the difficulty in establishing and defining the policy problem. An exposition of the nature of the policy problem is therefore essential. If a policy problem is not correctly diagnosed, this could easily create more problems and eventually contribute to failure in policy implementation and hence service delivery. To attain the policy goal, it is critical to identify the policy problem correctly and furthermore, to apply relevant policy resolutions. For this purpose, the Child Support Grant (CSG) policy and other South African policies are highlighted to illustrate the complexities surrounding policy problems. Despite an expanding global economy, the societal problem of child poverty has grown both across and within countries. The extent and depth of child poverty in developing countries requires appropriate policy responses.

**PROBLEM SITUATION**

Policy making is generally initiated when someone perceives that a problem exists in society. It is not always clear at the start what the problem is, at what level it should be tackled, or even that there is a problem at all (Irwin, 2003:37). Is there really a problem? In asking this question, the policy maker tries not only to establish that there is a problem, but what the magnitude and essence of that problem may be. The analyst makes a preliminary search for empirical evidence of the suspected problem to support the existence of the problem (Irwin, 2003:37). Anderson (1994:94) defines policy problems as circumstances or situations which result in people experiencing needs or dissatisfaction, for which they seek relief or redress. Policy problems are the result of thoughts acting on the environment, and are conceptual constructs, since they are elements which have been extracted from the problem situation by analysis. We experience the problem situation, and not the problem itself.

When beginning to work on a problem, the policy maker should question the decision-maker or the commissioner of the analysis, and all other people in the organization or associated with the problem that would be likely to be able to assist. Specifically, the policy maker should ask such questions as (Quade, 1975:67):

- How did the problem arise? Why is it a problem?
- Who are the people who believe it to be a problem?
- If it involves implementing a decision higher up in the hierarchy, what is the chain of argument leading to that decision?
- Why is a solution important? If an analysis is made, will what be done with it? Will anybody be able to act on the recommendations?
- What should a solution look like? What sort of solution may be acceptable?
- Is it the right problem anyway? Might it not be a manifestation or symptom of a much larger or deeper problem? Would it be better to tackle this larger problem, if there is one?
- Since analytic resources are always limited, does it seem at this stage, that there would be a return from the study effort that would be justified or would this analytic effort be better applied elsewhere?

Through these questions and their answers, the policy maker should begin to establish a clear picture regarding the nature of the problem, its scope, and the benefits which would result from a more exhaustive exploratory effort. A major task may be to determine what the decision-maker really wants to accomplish. The ultimate goals of what the outcomes of analysis should be are easy to state, but the immediate objectives that lead directly to them are more difficult to establish. It is the responsibility of the decision-maker to look out for the public good, although it may be very difficult for him to determine what that public good is: even if he knows what it is abstractly and ultimately, it can be challenging to formulate shorter range targets which will lead to that ultimate goal. Time spent on this aspect of the problem is time well spent, since it is pointless to look for the best manner to accomplish the wrong objective (Quade, 1975:67).

**THE CONTEXT OF THE POLICY PROBLEM**

The reality of the policy problem often does not match the theory presented in textbooks. For the purposes of study a single problem may be isolated, but this is hardly ever the case in a real life situation. Experienced policy makers will attest to the fact that problem identification and the eventual policy design and implementation is not a linear process. The systematic progression is sometimes referred to as the so-called ‘policy cycle’. It is important that students and practitioners of policy problems alike realize that we live in an age not only of globalization, but also of a whole host of complex relations between different policy problems.

The real world of the policy problem is ambiguous and generally open for debate. A single problem seldom stands out to be addressed, but in reality, there is a complex meshing of related issues, for example, the policy problem of crime involves issues of
unemployment, poverty, youth, tourism and economic growth, amongst others. Each of these issues would present a distinct perspective on the ‘problem’. The final diagnosis and structuring of a policy problem will resemble an understanding of the world (Colebatch, 1999).

In South Africa, the child care problem resolves around the whole concept of poverty. Poverty is again a societal problem with several dimensions. This policy problem is illustrated in Figure 1 by using the example of the CSG. Data from this example will be used to illustrate various points in this article.

The origin of the Child Support Grant (CSG) in South Africa may be traced back to the findings of the Lund Commission (Republic of South Africa, 1996a). Defining the policy problem with respect to the Child Support Grant eventually saw legislative fruition in the form of the Social Assistance Act (1992) and the Amendment Act (Republic of South Africa, 2004).

INDICATORS OF A POLICY PROBLEM

Perceptions of a policy problem arise where those involved in the policy area perceive that something is not functioning correctly and seek alterations in the existing pattern. Stakeholders at different levels and who perform different functions perceive dysfunctions differently. Therefore there are often so many opinions about what the manifestations of the problem are and what the underlying cause is, that reports become self-interested and useless (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:8). There may not even be agreement among the various stakeholders that something is wrong, and even when there is agreement over the existence of a problem, it is difficult to obtain agreement on what the most effective treatment is (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:8). Child care is one of the poverty-related issues that is addressed by different stakeholders with varied viewpoints about the exact nature of the problem. The implementation of the CSG in South Africa is an excellent example of different perspectives about the problem of child care and how to address it. Nevertheless, the policy problem in this case was somehow focused by the Constitution the Republic of South Africa, 1996, that provides for the basic needs of the child (Republic of South Africa, 1996b).

In the instance of the CSG, child poverty is the core and also one of the most serious problems facing many countries, including South Africa. An international perspective on the problem may be summarized as follows (UNICEF, 2005):

- 640 million children (one in three) in developing countries live without adequate shelter;
- 400 million children (one in five) have no access to safe water;
- 270 million children (one in seven) have no access to health services;
- More than 121 million primary school-age children are out of school, the majority of them are girls.

The South African causes and experiences of the policy problem are consistent with the UNICEF (2005) findings and are reported in Table 1.

Table 1: The extent of child poverty in South Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis based on OHS 1999 dataset</th>
<th>Using relative poverty measure of lowest two quintiles in 1999 terms</th>
<th>Using absolute poverty measures of R490 in 2002 terms</th>
<th>Using absolute poverty measure of R245 in 2002 terms (ultra-poor)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of 0-17 yr olds living in poverty</td>
<td>59,2%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of 0-17 yr olds living in poverty</td>
<td>10,5 million</td>
<td>14,3 million</td>
<td>11 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of 0-6 yr olds living in poverty</td>
<td>59,3%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of 0-6 yr olds living in poverty</td>
<td>3,8 million</td>
<td>5,2 million</td>
<td>3,9 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Biyase (2005)

Table 1 indicates the high incidence of child poverty in South Africa, which is a major factor contributing to the policy problem.


The CSG was introduced in South Africa as a result of the belief that it is a desirable and necessary anti-poverty strategy. However, having implemented a policy response, there remain reservations about and problems associated with the grant itself (Biyase,
In some developing countries the head of the household appropriates the grant money for their own benefit. In other instances, the CSG is perceived as a handout reinforcing a culture of dependency and inducing laziness. Another perceived problem links the CSG grant to the whole question of employment. There is a view that the CSG may give rise to a decrease in the demand for paid work in a country’s economy, and also a diminished obligation of government and society to provide paid work. Furthermore, there are also misguided perceptions by the recipients of the grants. Biyase (2005:8) reports a Transkean women who remarks: “They [government] care about us. I see more women having babies because they know they can get this [CSG] grant”. The same author reports that the problems associated with the CSG are worsened by teenage mothers who spend the grant on clothing and lipstick (Biyase 2005:8).

A simple test done by Biyase (2005) indicates the relationship between the CSG and the fertility rate in South Africa. The results of this investigation are presented in Table 2. The table demonstrates that the CSG increased from R100 in 1998 to R160 in 2003, while the fertility rate decreased from 26,43% in 1998 to 18,87% in 2003.

Table 2: The relationship between CSG and birth rate in South Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>CSG (Rands per month)</th>
<th>Birth Rate (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>R 100</td>
<td>26,43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>R 100</td>
<td>25,94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>R 100</td>
<td>24,56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>R 110</td>
<td>21,12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>R 140</td>
<td>20,63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>R 160</td>
<td>18,87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Biyase (2005:9) and Statistics South Africa

The simple test as reflected in Table 2 shows a negative correlation between the amount of the CSG and the fertility rate. It therefore provides no support for the perception that the CSG induces teenage pregnancies. However, fertility is a complex issue which cannot be determined by a single cause such as the CSG. This again indicates the complexity of the policy problem.

PROBLEM SENSING

The process of policy making does not begin with clearly expressed concerns, but an awareness of diffuse worries and inchoate signs of stress (Rein & White 1977:262). These diffuse worries and undeveloped signs of stress are not problems, but problem situations. It should be noted that ample problem situations exist, but the challenge is to sense the particular problems within the context of the problem situations.

The understanding of social problems is based on socially and personally constructed perceptions of reality, which are influenced by culture, language and meaning (Chapin, 1995:4). Identification and understanding of various human situations as problems is shaped by the personal definitions, explanations and assertions of the people perceiving the problem. These definitions, explanations and assertions are constructed to assist in making sense of those phenomena and events that are experienced and to assist in deciding how to respond to those experiences. Thus one can say that reality is socially constructed, and since current conceptualizations of social problems are entrenched in individual or environmental pathology, analysts must think of ways in which these problems can be reconceptualized to reflect the reality of the people experiencing them (Chapin, 1995:4).

If there is a perception of deviation from the ‘normal state’, then a problem has been sensed. If one defines a problem as a deviation from the desired state, then the question arises: When is the deviation from the desired state relevant, and which actions could be implemented to resolve the problem? When applied to the study of social issues, this perspective emphasizes the distinction between objective conditions and the definition of some conditions as problems by the people experiencing them (Dunn 1988:726). At this point, it is not clear if there is a problem, and the issue must be investigated further. Once the existence of a problem is recognized, the policy analyst must conceptualize the problem from the experienced problematic situation to a substantive problem where it is defined in its most basic and general terms (Dunn, 1981:108 – see Figure 2).

PROBLEM STRUCTURING

Policy makers have a need for methods which allow them to recognize when they have reached the appropriate estimated boundaries of a problem. Modern analytic thinking is illustrated by the views of Dunn (1988:726), who suggests that problems may be either structured or ill-structured. Dunn (1988) defines a structured decision problem as a well-bounded unambiguous statement of what the decision-maker wanted to overcome and a thorough description of the options available to the policy maker. In a well structured problem, the relationship between decision-makers, preferences or utilities, outcomes and states of nature are certain, probabilistic or uncertain. These are problems about which adequate is available so that they can be formulated in ways that are susceptible to precise analytic methods of analysis. Ill-structured problems have decision-makers, preferences or utilities, alternatives, outcomes and states of nature which are unknown. Dunn (1981:107) suggests a sub-process of problem structuring which can be used to define an ill-structured problem, since in such a case, the analyst must play an active role in defining the nature of the problem. As indicated by Figure 2, three independent phases of problem structuring in the policy process can be identified: problem sensing, problem conceptualization and problem specification.

The problem structuring process begins with the felt existence of a situation which the perceiver experiences as problematic (problem sensing). In real life, any one of the phases may the starting point of the structuring process. When moving from the problematic situation, the problem is conceptualized in the most basic, general terms. After the substantive
problem has been consciously or unconsciously conceptualized, the formal problem is clarified and detailed through problem specification, often through the use of models. It is often at this point that difficulties occur because of the weak link between the formal problem representation and the ill-structured substantive problem (Dunn, 1981:109).

PROBLEMS OF DIAGNOSIS

According to Hogwood and Peters (1985:13), the ability to make the decision on whether and how to intervene, is based on the policy maker’s correct diagnosis of the nature of the disorder. This can be challenging for a policy maker who lacks knowledge of the nature of the policy problem and the nature of the underlying social processes involved in generating the policy problems. For instance, the CSG is one of several child care policies that are closely related. Other child care issues include school fees policy, school fee exemption policy, feeding programmes, school feeding programmes, and free primary health care.

The following issues affect the accuracy of the problem diagnosis:

Policy interaction effects

Human beings have a tendency to attempt to find a single cause for every observed phenomenon, perhaps as a result of laziness or innate difficulties in dealing with complexity. Unfortunately, most policy problems do not have a single, neat cause. One of the most common difficulties in diagnosing policy problems is when two or more policy programmes, which work properly within their own policy areas, interact to produce severe problems. This poses a dilemma for the policy analyst on how to deal with programmes which are not necessarily malfunctioning, but are interacting harmfully. (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:13-14). Wildavsky (in Hogwood & Peters, 1985:14) suggests that sometimes a new programme, which is correct for the problems created by interaction, may be necessary. Interactions are not always obvious, especially with respect to government’s central mechanism, and may manifest themselves as sub-optimal service delivery.

Same symptoms, different policy problems

Different underlying problems often manifest similar indicators (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:14). Correcting these policy problems will require very different interventions, depending on their root cause. However, there is a tendency to treat the symptoms simply by designing a new way of processing information within the policy process. If those in control are unconcerned with the problem, it may be exacerbated by an excess of information and a false sense of complacency by assuming the problem has been solved (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:14).

Changing symptoms and diseases

Sometimes, defining a problem and recommending a course of action requires hitting a moving target, because of the self-limiting nature of many disorders. Programmes need to have mechanisms in place for adapting to difficulties which may occur if the definition and solution to the problem are misdirected (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:15). For example, the implementation of the current CSG necessitates a constant revision of the policy (Deputy Director, Department of Social Development, 2006). The child grant started out up to the age of 7 years, was later raised to 14 years and now there is pressure to increase it to the age of 18 years. Investigation is needed in order to establish if a problem is still the same or whether there is indeed a case of a moving target.

The principle of methodological congruence

The principle of methodological congruence refers to the appropriateness of a particular type of method as a function of its congruence with the type of problem under investigation. This is similar to Dunn’s general principle, which contends that conventional scientific methodologies are incompatible with social problems which have exceeded the given threshold of complexity (Dunn, 1988:724).

By distinguishing between member and class, first-order and second-order problems, a starting point for the assessment of the suitability of the various policy analysis methods is established. The majority of existing methods are suitable for problems of the first order, which are relatively well-structured and have certain or probabilistic relationships among the decision-maker, states of nature, alternatives, outcomes and utilities. However, the methodological congruence principle contends that first-order methods are unsuitable for second order problems characterized as ill-structured and disordered (Dunn, 1988:724).

Typically, those who approach disordered problems with methods more suited to well-structured problems tend to ignore the principle of methodological congruence and make the type III error of ‘solving the wrong problem’ (Dunn, 1988:725).
PROBLEM DEFINITION

What is a problem? The typical definition would be an unacceptable gap between aspiration levels and the present and future circumstances (Hoppe, 2002:308). Thus one can argue that a problem is an analytical compound of three elements, namely an ethical standard; a situation (present or future); and the relationship between the standard and the situation, which is interpreted as a gap that should not exist (Hoppe, 2002:308).

Carefully defining and clarifying the problem to be addressed by the policy creates a foundation of knowledge which can be used to assess the appropriateness of current social policy and to form new policies. The definition and clarification of a problem is fundamental to the process of transforming a condition through stakeholder agreement that their needs deserve special attention (Hoppe, 2002:308).

WHO DEFINES THE POLICY PROBLEM?

Special attention must be given to a problem definition in order to express what is occurring and to describe processes and desired outcomes (Hanberger, 2001:308). A policy problem is defined by conceptualising the collective challenges or issues to be dealt with, and mobilising others in a specific way to consider the problem and solutions. By turning the policy problem into an empirical question and unfolding the associated policy problems which emerge and compete, all levels of government, as well as professionals, companies and pressure groups who are trying to influence public policy, can be approached to define the problem. If attention is paid only to the formal authority structure that has the power to define and steer implementation of the policy problem, there is the risk of a lack of understanding of the problem, as informal institutions and actors without formal responsibility can be vitally important. More than one policy problem can be expressed and it could be misleading to accept only one policy problem definition (Hanberger, 2001:53).

SOURCES OF THE PROBLEM

Often, the source of the policy problem is not known, but certain basic problems which can make policy making a complicated task will be discussed, and which seem to produce numerous disorders (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:17).

Collective problems

Public policy making is, as the term implies, a public activity. Many problematic circumstances arise from the openness, accountability and democracy essential for making and implementing public policies (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:17). In the public sector factors must be considered which could be conveniently ignored in the private sector. A second facet of the collectiveness issue arises from the inconsistency of collective decision making: policies which are rational and maximize personal value for the individual, become dysfunctional when pursued collectively (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:18-19).

Negative synergism

This problem has already been alluded to under ‘policy interaction effects’. Organizations do not exist alone but rather in large environments where policies overlap and have possible negative effects when they are combined (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:19). Thus, in order to understand policy problems, one must understand the environment of policy making as having multiple policyprogrammes and many organizations, which can have negative consequences for each other (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:20).

Limits of control

Democratic governments attempt to ensure the personal and economic freedom of citizens. However, these freedoms present obstacles for governments attempting to influence their citizens’ behaviour. As a result, government interventions can lead to many negative consequences because of their inability to control and foresee the behaviour of a target population in reacting to policies (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:20).

Ignorance

Governments are often ill-informed about the problems being addressed through their policies. Since they must frequently construct policies about events which will occur in the future (if at all), this is not entirely their fault. However, in other circumstances, their ignorance is less acceptable (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:20). Sometimes, governments choose to be ignorant because they do not want to exhibit any reaction, or because they think any reaction might only draw negative attention to the problem. The problems of upward information communication in large organizations are well recognized. As a result, those in central decision-making positions may be uninformed, even if the entire structure may not be (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:21).

A lack of understanding of social processes is to be expected, given the complexity and dynamics thereof. However, designing programmes based on critical assumptions which are unjustifiable in terms of current understanding is inexcusable. If one cannot fully understand the likely impact of the policy on social processes through available analysis, one can at least reveal the degree of ignorance, and have an idea of how much of the policy is in uncharted territory with the risk of serious consequences (Hogwood & Peters, 1985:21).

CATEGORIES OF THE PROBLEM DEFINITION

Policy problem definition is a form of public rhetoric which uses characteristic vocabulary to describe and explain the problem at hand. As such, use is made of recurrent categories of problem definition:
Causality

Thinking in causal terms is an ingrained human propensity. The immediate reaction to an event is to ascertain the underlying reasons for the occurrence. Rochefort and Cobb (1994) distinguish between intentional and accidental causes. Intentional causes are defined as a deliberate human action intended to bring about a specific result. In public policy making, if the action is perceived to be a success, it is categorized as rational; whereas if it is unsuccessful, the source of the failure is investigated. Accidental causes are associated with natural intervention, i.e. ‘the result of accident or fate’, and there is no person on whom the blame can be placed.

The definition of some problems is simple, specifying singular causal agents. Other problems have multiple influences. Multi-causal explanations, however, often signify a strategy intended to inhibit prompt response. Policy makers who are overwhelmed with the interaction of many causes which they do not fully comprehend, may suggest a deeper study of the issue or simply claim that intervention at this time would be imprudent. There are, however, significant exceptions to this common pattern. Some multi-causal explanations and the resulting multiple solutions can be some of the most sophisticated policy undertakings with the most chance of building support (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994:16). A social problem may have several dimensions besides that of causality which influence the chance of public action and foreshadow key aspects of policy design.

Severity

Severity refers to how serious a problem and its consequences are perceived to be, and is a crucial descriptive dimension of a problem. Does the issue warrant space on a full agenda? An issue which affects a large number of people, or has a devastating impact on a few, can acquire high priority status. Since this element of problem definition is crucial in securing public awareness, how forcefully the label of severity is applied is a controversial argument (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994:17).

Incidence

Incidence represents the scope of the population affected by a social problem, as well as categories of people who are at disproportionate risk. Like many facets of problem definition, incidence can be a contented question which combines available information and politics (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994:20). At times, the matter is one which varies over time, that is, is a problem stable, declining or growing, and at what rate? Linear and exponential projections tend to cause the most pressure for swift public intervention if they are accepted as valid. However, the way in which the information is amassed and presented has a huge influence. Incidence patterns can be represented in a number of ways. For instance, attention can be drawn to an issue’s social-class dimension, or the issue may be identified with a particular population cohort (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994:20).

Novelty

An issue described as novel, unprecedented or unique can attract attention which then wanes over time when the novelty diminishes, and the public and media are distracted from it (Downs & Bosso in Rochefort & Cobb, 1994:21). However, issues which have not emerged before are difficult to conceptualize, and do not have typical solutions. Furthermore, conflict may surface as the problem is publicized and observers expect a solution, yet no consensus within the political system can be reached on how to confront the problem (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994:21).

Proximity

When a problem hits close to home or intrudes directly upon a person’s interest, it can be said that the issue has close proximity. Political proponents may attempt to enlarge their support base by arguing personal relevancy, since members of the audience will express their concerns politically if a case of relevancy can be made (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994:21).

Crisis

Crisis is used to define a situation where corrective action is long overdue, and is undeniably one of the most commonly used expressions in political vocabulary. The distinction between a problem and a crisis is unclear, and advocates of an issue tend to use a crisis label to gain momentum for a flagging cause (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994: 21-22).

PROBLEM SOLUTION

Problems are dynamic and change over time. They may improve, worsen or vary. The policies designed to solve them cannot be meaningfully formulated, implemented and reviewed unless one is able to keep track of and assess the changing situations. It is therefore essential to periodically monitor and evaluate the state and course of a problem. Since its inception in 1998, the CSG has been rolled out very rapidly and now reaches more than seven million children. It is having a significant impact on the alleviation of poverty by increasing children’s access to food, education and health care (Goldblatt, Solange & Hall, 2006). Despite this remarkable achievement, not all poor children are managing to access the grant. The way in which the grant is implemented is not always consistent across the provinces or within provinces (Goldblatt et al., 2006). Thus, implementation factors that are supposed to be the solution to the policy problem, can also exacerbate it. For example, in the case of the CSG, certain implementation problems added to the burdens of poor primary care-givers in their interaction with the Department of Social Development and other government departments (Goldblatt et al., 2006). The establishment of the South African Social Security Agency Act, 2004 and the Social Security Agency are developments to improve government policy on grants and grants administration.
The complexity and scope of real world social problems render the task of problem solution exceedingly difficult. The multi-cycle structure of complex problems consists of numerous variables and feedback cycles; the larger the scope and complexity of the problem, the greater the number of its constituent variables and cycles, which makes the task of monitoring a complex problem situation over time unmanageable. Rastogi (1992:56) developed an expression to articulate the viability of variables and the overall ‘health’ of the system.

The system viability or health ($Z_t$) in a given time period ($t$) is:

$$Z_t = \frac{\sum \lambda_i / N}{N}$$

where $\lambda_i$ is the viability measurement of the ith salient variable, and $i=1,2,3,... N$ is the number of salient variables.

The viability of a variable ($\lambda$) represents its effectiveness or strength. It is a generalized evaluative measure, which is mapped on the performance measures of the variables. It is measured on a scale of 0 to 1, with $\lambda = 1$ being the uppermost limit of the performance value of the variable, and $\lambda = 0$ indicating the lowest limit of the performance value. $\lambda = 0.5$ is the midpoint of the viability scale, representing an ‘average’ performance level, with the zones 0.25 to 0.5 representing ‘below average’ and the zones 0.5 to 0.75 representing ‘above average’. The region of 0.0 to 0.25 represents the worst and 0.75 to 1.0 the best values of performance. The value of system viability also varies between 0 and 1. The system viability expression does not include any measure of the relative importance of the system’s salient variables, since they represent Ashby’s concept of essential variables (Ashby in Rastogi, 1992:57). Any essential variable is capable of causing acute disorder in the system if it reaches and crosses its critical threshold. Thus any salient variable within the ‘collapse zone’ of $\lambda = 0$ to 0.25 would cause severe disorder in a policy system (Rastogi 1992: 57).

Organizational analysis and policy analysis tend to focus on the manifestations of underlying problems, rather than the causes of these problems, which may limit the effectiveness of the recommended solutions. Hogwood and Peters (1985) suggest that the concept of supportive treatment in medicine where a patient is maintained without attempts to treat the underlying cause of an unknown disorder may be considered a metaphor for handling policy disorders. Intervention to address an improperly identified underlying policy problem may produce many more problems than it may solve. However, caution must be exercised, since if the symptoms are being produced by an underlying problem, then delayed action to deal with the root cause of the problem may allow the factors associated with the problem to become further institutionalized (Hogwood & Peters, 1985).

**CONCLUSION**

Different stakeholders may view a policy problem from different perspectives, which will impact on the eventual structuring thereof. The wrong diagnosis of the problem situation and consequently the policy problem could easily lead to a faulty solution. The methodological congruence principle states that the wrong problem can hardly be solved by successful policy implementation. Such action can even create further problems and complicate the intermeshed relationships between policy problems. It is critical to realize that virtually no singular linear relationship between cause and problem exists in this day and age. Rather, there is a complicated network of related policy problems. This requires policy makers and decision-makers to carefully appreciate their respective situations in order to plot the range of related policy problems. This is equally true when it comes to the solutions of such problems.

By focusing on areas of overlap and connection, rather than discrepancies, we can formulate the fundamentals of an emerging problem definition approach to policy making. This could lay the groundwork for more refined policies in future. The example of the CSG that was cited in this article indeed exhibits all the dimensions of a policy problem. The problem of poverty in general is evidenced by certain indicators. Child poverty is therefore only one aspect of poverty in society and child care in turn, is one aspect of policy measures to address child poverty. The mere fact that the policy on CSG is successfully implemented or not, cannot be a linear cause for the alleviation of child poverty in South Africa. However, the implementation of the CSG can indeed contribute to alleviating child poverty, notwithstanding some of the problems associated with the grant. The CSG activities and related programmes prove that government is indeed paying attention to the redefinition of the problem on an ongoing basis. The mere historical development of the CSG is evidence of this ongoing process of redefinition. Society in general is not stable, and in particular, South African society may create a moving target. The evolvement of the problem is sometimes the result of certain adaptations by the beneficiaries. It is often difficult to comprehend all the variables in addressing a problem, hence the attempt to supply a formula in the previous section to calculate the viability of the policy in terms of the different variables.

The study of problem definition offers a systematic way of unveiling the intricacies and interrelationships and their significance in society. For example, defining the problem of child poverty and the need for child care set the stage for community debate and action. The cause of conflicts may be partially understood by reference to the abilities of various groups to establish their definition of the problem as the appropriate one. However, problem definitions do not solve everything. Understanding community responses requires a broader look at the political, institutional and economic characteristics of the local political economy, and indeed, national and international forces. The local economy in South Africa is critical to understanding each response to the CSG.

The organization of government is also important for problem definition. The fragmentation of the CSG between national and provincial governments could further complicate the problem. Other institutions that are involved with child care must also be considered, such as NGOs and community organizations.

Nevertheless, accurate problem definitions remains critical. It is an old political truth that power is revealed not by those who have the ability to provide answers, but by those who frame the original questions. Framing the original question is indeed what problem definition is all about. The different dimensions of problem definition must be acceptable to the key stakeholders in the community. Political acceptability is dependent largely on
congruence with the existing political economy. Thus, definitions must be consistent with economic conditions and institutional and community interests.

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