

BACKGROUND

The business of government is to make choices and strategically manage resources towards achieving the goals those choices imply. Public policy is the product of these choices, setting the parameters within which government departments and others operating within the sphere of particular policies are either intended, or made, to function. Within government, policy management has become a critical area in the present development debate. The main factors affecting policy management include:

- conducive policy environment;
- organisational and institutional infrastructure; and
- policy analysis capacity.

CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR POLICY MANAGEMENT

Trust between policy-makers

Trust between policy-makers is crucial for effective policy management. However, the lack of popular participation and contestable policy advice in the policy development process, together with the lack of trust between the top policy-makers, means policies have been formulated without the requisite inputs and information. The absence of satisfactory consultation means that assumptions made in respect of target groups could be wrong due to the fact that their implications have not been fully examined.

Shared sense of direction

It is important that policy-makers, including politicians and civil servants, share a common purpose, values and understanding of public interest resulting in a common sense of direction. This involves creating a public service ethos, developed jointly by politicians and civil servants, based on the country's priorities and principles of good governance such as an atmosphere of openness, transparency of processes, availability of good quality information, improved quality of decision-making, increased commitment to productivity and services to the public etc.

Avoidance of over-emphasis on confidentiality

Another factor which militates against an open environment for policy management is an over-emphasis on confidentiality. Confidentiality, though important in conducting government business can, and does, constrain effective policy

management. This occurs when too many government activities are classified as confidential.

Free and uncontrolled flow of ideas

A successful policy management environment requires the free flow of ideas, including a free press. Uncensored debate on policy issues, especially before decisions are made and implemented, would allow for a wider range of factors to be taken into account.

ORGANISATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

In addition to a conducive environment, successful policy development needs to be complemented by a well-articulated organisational and institutional infrastructure. This means the establishment of some key organisations charged with taking action in respect of the various activities in the policy management process. It also involves ensuring that they are adequately staffed and well-co-ordinated and that they operate as a system.

The key issue is that the interest of the whole of government must ultimately prevail over department or sectoral interests. It is strongly felt in many Commonwealth countries that organisational structures had become too departmental to the relative neglect of broader governmental issues. The current global pressures on governments demand policy choices which are long-term and strategic as well as horizontal in nature. Such issues demand centralised and more co-ordinated approaches at every level of governmental structures.

Many Commonwealth governments have attempted in the past to devise a variety of organisational configurations consisting of line and co-ordinating ministries, local governments, parastatals and non-governmental organisations. However, more recent experiences have revealed some basic weaknesses in the organisational and institutional mechanisms that were in place. These are given below.

Need for a clear definition of organisational roles

Institutions in place have lacked clearly-defined organisational roles which indicate who is to do what, when and how, with the result that instead of co-operating, conflict and duplication of effort is prevalent. One cause is that new policies are introduced without sufficient examination of the implementation strategies. This usually results in the creation of new departments or agencies which lack clear policy guidelines. This can lead to departments having overlapping responsibilities without any clear directives on their respective roles or where and how they should interact.

Organisational policy units

In many Commonwealth countries there is a lack of organisational and institutional co-ordination for analysis, monitoring and evaluating policies. Nor is there a formal mechanism for tracking performance, outcome or impact. Policy work varies considerably across departments; some departments are more homogeneous than others. While small departments can rely on informal mechanisms for policy co-ordination, there is a greater need for a more centralised and co-ordinated approach to policy management at departmental level.

Co-ordinating policy management activities

The co-ordination of management activities can be a problem area. Although each country has, in theory, a basic framework for co-ordinating the management of functions, often the institutional arrangements in place have not guaranteed effective synchronisation. Frequently, sharp disjunctures have appeared in the operations of different parts of the system. Poor policy co-ordination can be seen by policy conflicts and inconsistencies; abrupt reversals or changes in policy; and wasted resources.

Co-ordination among line ministries

Equally problematic is the absence of co-ordination among line ministries. While many countries have pushed for integrated programmes, the synchronisation of goals between implementation organs remains only at the level of the plan document.

Ministerial performance is also undermined by the lack of internal coherence. A ministry has different functions from a department. The former is usually concerned with overall policy matters and the latter handles the operational and technical aspects. However, in a number of countries, ministries are often also burdened with the technical considerations, thus overstressing their capabilities in effectively handling policy-related issues.

Efficient channels of communication

Co-ordination is further hampered by poor communication channels in the administrative system and in the relationship between administration and the social environment. Communication should be structured so that inputs and outputs of the policy management process are quick and precise.

Authority without requisite power

Another institutional and organisational problem which affects policy management is the tendency to give authority without the requisite power. Frequently, coordinating ministries who have been given power over planning, budget and manpower, discover their directive is circumscribed by the lack of leverage over the sectoral ministries. Authority can also be diluted by the interventions of party organs who disrupt the policy-making process.

POLICY ANALYSIS CAPACITY

The third issue affecting policy management effectiveness is the large number of people involved in the government system, non-governmental organisations, universities and other agencies expected to make a contribution to the policy management process. While many Commonwealth countries have educated and skilled individuals, there is a shortfall in candidates who have knowledge, skills and experience in the areas of policy analysis and evaluation.

Moreover, in many countries where they do have such personnel in adequate numbers, they are either not properly utilised because there are no organisations demanding their skills or, where these organisations do exist, they are employed but their advice is not taken seriously.