

Dear Students of Social Work,

The Role of Social Service Practitioners in Welfare policy analysis



Social work students are sometimes unwittingly caught in having to respond to whether they should be in direct practice or in policy work. This however does not require an either-or answer. When we train students and practitioners holistically, they will see the inter-connectedness and how each complements the work of the other. Through training, we equip students with a working knowledge of the social welfare system which will include learning about how to analyse social welfare policies.¹ Social welfare policy analysis does not belong solely to political scientists, economists or government officials. As social work is about the delivery of social services, practitioners bring with them a unique perspective on the purpose and rationale of social programs and their outcomes. This perspective is critical to the design, evaluation, review and improvement of policies. This includes the knowledge of the personal experiences of people who are affected by these policies. This feedback is necessary as all too often, policy decisions are made on the basis of economic and political considerations, whereas the experiences of those directly affected by these decisions are often not given due attention at the conception of the policy.

The Science of muddling through

Another interesting aspect of social welfare policy making that is worth early appreciation by students is the fact that the policy making process does not work like a standard operating procedure manual of systematic steps and is often not presented in neatly drawn diagrams. Policy making is usually messy, and only occasionally pristinely logical or rational. Many factors interfere with rationality such as the lack of information, diverse interest groups with varying resources, the lack of time to weigh the different possibilities and competing personal and social values. Other factors also play a part in influencing the development and implementation of policies, and the influences vary at different times in the history of each policy.

Charles Lindblom's theory of incrementalism² which states that public policy is developed through small changes to existing policies is also relevant to this discussion. He suggested that there is never enough time to consider all the information; that information on all possible choices is not readily available, and that it is easier to make small changes to existing policies than to create something entirely new. His view is that great investments have been made in current programs, and it is very hard to dislodge systems that have already been in existence for a long time. Those who have had the experience of designing and reviewing policies will attest to how the lack of details in policy design is common and how details are sometimes omitted, inserted or dislodged arising from last minute pressures or other considerations. So while we do learn to be systematic in our approach to policy designing and analysis, the process can in reality be messy.

Values and principles



Let us now consider the factors that might contribute to making the process an iterative, complicated or complex one. Policy making requires knowledge about values that are present in various segments of society, the possible alternatives and the costs and benefits involved. Such information is hard to come by. Just take the matter of values and competing interests as an example. It is near impossible to fully assess all the values and alternatives and to weigh all the costs and benefits involved in social welfare policy making.

¹ Gilbert, N., Specht, H., & Terrell, P. (1993). *Dimensions of social welfare policy (3rd ed.)*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

² Lindblom, Charles E. (November/ December, 1979). "Still muddling, not yet through". *Public Administration Review*, 39 (6), pp. 517–526.

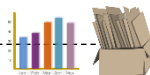
There have been attempts to gather all these information but in reality, they are inadequate and insufficient in depth. This is so because there is always a pressure of time and a lack of agreement about the cost-benefit analysis which demands a consensus on the value proposition.

There is always a plan for delivering a policy. In practice however, unanticipated factors will lead to repetitive delays in the timeline and an even possible rush towards the end to meet delivery.

Policy making begins with a rigorous deliberation about the values that will shape the policy design. These involve worldviews and how the various players in policy formulation see the complex aspects of social conditions and structures that give rise to their values and beliefs. Values and beliefs constantly affect the policy making process as constituents, legislators, regulators, service providers and beneficiaries often hold different and sometimes even conflicting values and beliefs. For example, if one believes in individual responsibility over social responsibility, one is less likely to demand much of state subsidised welfare programs. The design of such programs will then tend to hold people solely responsible for their own fate based on the notion that those who work hard and are self-reliant will be rewarded with material success. Those who do not make it are in their condition because of personal inadequacy, lack of effort or insufficient skill. However, if the belief is that it is important to have a concerted effort on behalf of common goals to correct the divisiveness that comes from unchecked self-advancement, then it is necessary for the state to be more interventionist. The question then is the extent of that intervention and the role of the state in it. The conflict in values and beliefs these days happen more in the area of identifying socioeconomic factors, addressing inequality and disparities, creating opportunities and defining social justice. Whatever it is, we all wear different lenses that are shaped by our values and beliefs when we design, review or critique welfare policies.

The tension in policy making is often played out in the nexus of the state, community and individual, where the question arises on whom a social problem should be attributed to and with whom the responsibility in resolving the problem should lie. To allow for a better discussion on the responsibilities and roles of various stakeholders in policy making, one could examine the process of policy making in terms of 'values' and 'principles'³. Some see 'values' as something more personal and lived out by individuals and families, and 'principles' as rules and statements of aspiration. For example, a principle can be lived out through different values. For example, "meritocracy" can be a principle, while "rewarding talent" and "aiming for excellence" are values. One way to demarcate the responsibilities and roles of policy making is for the state to determine the broad principles for governing and delivering essential services to meet needs and to enable civil society to play a role in operationalizing values which may take on a variety of expressions. By demarcating the role of the state and that of civil society, the latter is given a role and the space to accommodate the increasing number of players, thereby in the process, create more comprehensive policy reviews.

Relevance of research in policy making



What then is the role of research in policy making if in practice, policy making is a less than systematic process? We must remember that policy making must try to be built on as much information about the problem and on as many possible choices available as possible. As such, research is a crucial aspect of policy formulation. Research, indicators and statistics are important elements in policy formulation and planning, just as the scale is crucial to the drawing and reading of maps. Without the scale, the map loses its proportion. Similarly, without research, policy formulation is aimless, loses a sense of relativity and can end up as mere rhetoric. With research, policies will be better directed with increased perspectives to form solutions to tackle the social issue at hand.

³ Values are standards of behaviour while principles are rules or beliefs governing one's behaviour. (www.oxforddictionaries.com)

It is vital for policy formulation as it provides the information needed for answering the following questions:

- a) what is the problem,
- b) what is the size of the problem,
- c) who has the problem,
- d) why the problem exists,
- e) what solutions are successful or otherwise,
- f) what makes the solutions viable.

Good questions always provide the start for good research. In computer technology, garbage in leads to garbage out. So in research, poor questions lead to research that misleads. Poor questions are a waste of time and poor research is a waste of resources. Formulating the right questions is therefore crucial to research.

Social empathy



Lastly, there is another important aspect to good policy making and that is social empathy. Empathy as in “relational empathy” is the ability to understand the situation and experiences of another person and this is basic to social work training. Social empathy as described by Segal⁴ (2011) calls for us to use the insights gained about people’s lives to develop public policies that are sensitive to people’s needs based on the realities of their living situations. A social empathy perspective allows policy designers to analyse social concerns or problems and develop policies that reflect the lived experiences of people.

A more recent approach that aims to increase empathy is “design thinking”⁵. Design thinking teaches a set of skills using tools that enable the participants to have an understanding of the perspective of the users of services by detailing their views. These insights are useful in so far as they contribute to the various aspects of the service design. While it may be difficult to impart or teach individuals social empathy which comes from deeper or day to day experiences, there is a need to factor in social empathy so that social welfare policies can be developed to be more attuned to people’s needs.

Contribution of social work to policy making

A common challenge in social policy making is how to help people who have no personal experience or insight into what it means to be discriminated or to grow up in a poor or disadvantaged environment to understand what that looks and feels like. Walking the ground or visiting agencies or communities can be helpful but is insufficient for policy making. This is where the policy making process draws upon the insights of social work practitioners and taps on their deep understanding of the experiences of those with needs. This is also where social workers apply their training in policy analysis to contribute to policy making. Good policy analysis includes at least 3 areas of impact and social workers should contribute by analysing them: 1) the intended impact, 2) the actual impact, and 3) the follow up impact on those who have been affected by the policy and its subsequent programs. In conclusion, for social welfare policies to be more attuned to the needs of people, social policy makers have to focus on values and principles, develop good research and cultivate social empathy.

Ang Bee Lian
Director of Social Welfare, MSF
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⁴ Segal, E.A. (2011). Social empathy: A model built on empathy, contextual understanding and social responsibility that promotes social justice. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 37(1), pp. 266-277. DOI:10.1080/01488376.2011.564040

⁵ Found from Stanford’s Redesigning Theater and Design Thinking