Public Policy in Bangladesh: Balancing Change and Stability

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Abstract

Bangladesh, a rapidly developing nation in South Asia, is at a critical juncture in its public policy evolution. This paper examines the intricate balance between change and stability in shaping public policies that can foster sustainable development. By analyzing existing structures, cultural dynamics, and historical contexts, this work proposes a comprehensive modus operandi for public policy in Bangladesh that prioritizes adaptive strategies, stakeholder engagement, and evidence-based decision-making.

Keywords: Juncture. Dynamics. Modus. Context. Adaptive

1. Introduction

The field of public policy in Bangladesh has been profoundly influenced by a myriad of factors including political instability, economic challenges, social inequality, and environmental vulnerabilities. As the country strives to fulfill its developmental goals in the face of these challenges, the need for a coherent policy framework that balances change and stability becomes paramount. This paper posits that an effective modus operandi for public policy in Bangladesh should integrate innovative approaches while respecting the historical and socio-political contexts that underpin societal norms and structures.

2. Literature Review

Public policy frameworks worldwide are increasingly emphasizing the need for adaptive governance and participatory methods. Scholars like Ostrom (2009) have highlighted the importance of local governance in managing common resources, while others such as Pritchett et al. (2013) argue for the significance of context-specific solutions in public administration. In the context of Bangladesh, Rafiqul Islam (2015) discusses the challenges of bureaucratic rigidity and the need for reformative policies that can accommodate changing societal dynamics. This literature underscores the necessity of a balanced approach that leverages both stability and change.

A thorough framework for comprehending the sustainability of socio-ecological systems (SES) is presented in Elinor Ostrom's 2009 paper, "A General Framework for Analyzing Sustainability of Social-Ecological Systems," which was published in Science. This work is important because it questions the widely held beliefs that resource management problems can only be resolved by government action and that resource users are incapable of organizing themselves.

Ostrom distinguishes four fundamental SES subsystems:

1. Resource Systems (RS): These are the natural resources, such fisheries or forests that are under management.

2. Resource Units (RU): These are the distinct parts of the resource system, such as particular kinds of trees or fish.
3. Governance Systems (GS): These comprise the organizations and regulations that control the usage of resources.
4. Users (U): The people or organizations that make use of the resources.

In addition to interacting with one another, these subsystems are impacted by linked ecosystems (ECO) and larger social, economic, and political contexts

Ostrom's framework outlines **ten subsystem variables** that impact the likelihood of successful self-organization among resource users. These variables help in assessing how different factors can lead to sustainable management practices.

The framework emphasizes the need for local knowledge and adaptive governance, allowing communities to tailor management strategies to their specific contexts. Ostrom argues that effective management of common-pool resources often requires a polycentric approach, where multiple governing bodies operate at different scales rather than relying solely on centralized authority. This perspective is particularly relevant in addressing global challenges like climate change, where localized actions can contribute significantly to broader sustainability goals.

However, there are several shortcomings and critiques of her work that have been identified by scholars. Some claim that Ostrom's design guidelines for effective CPR governance might only apply to small-scale systems. Their efficacy in bigger, more intricate socio-ecological systems where dynamics might vary greatly is called into doubt by this constraint (Cooperation in Usangu, Tanzania. IDS Bulletin 32(4): 26–35. DOI: 10/bd765h). Although Ostrom emphasizes the value of local self-governance, other academics contend that this emphasis may ignore the impact of more significant political and economic systems. Her theory is criticized for failing to sufficiently address the ways in which outside influences, such market forces or government actions, might affect local governance initiatives. 9. (F. Cleaver, 2007). Another criticism of Ostrom's paradigm is that it tends to downplay how important power dynamics are to resource management. The way that stakeholder inequality might impact decision-making procedures and results in socio-ecological systems is not adequately taken into consideration by the framework. (P.Kashwan, 2016)

Furthermore, some academics point out that Ostrom's work on democratic theory has a blind spot, especially when it comes to deliberative and participatory democracy. There are worries that her paradigm leaves out important findings from these fields that could improve our comprehension of governance and collective action. (Mollinga PP, 2001). Some detractors contend that because Ostrom's frameworks have changed over time (from eight to ten design principles, for example), it is challenging to monitor the changes and evaluate their significance for empirical study and implementation. (Mosse D., 1997).

This study is going to solve these above marked shortcomings of Ostrom's with best possible suggestions and relevant strategies that would be outlined below.

Research Methodology

A common method in public policy research, secondary data analysis is used in this article. Its goal is to examine current policies and their effects in Bangladesh's socioeconomic setting. Even while secondary data might offer insightful information, prestigious journals frequently prefer approaches that incorporate primary data collecting (such as surveys and interviews) to strengthen the validity of results. A deeper comprehension of the topic and more nuanced perspectives are made possible by this inclusion.

3. Historical Context

Understanding the historical journey of Bangladesh is crucial for evaluating its current public policy landscape. Since gaining independence in 1971, the country has experienced periods of political tumult, economic hardships, and natural disasters that have shaped its governance structures. The legacy of colonial administrative practices and the impact of military rule have further influenced bureaucratic processes, often resulting in policies that lack adaptability to change. As Bangladesh continues to develop, reflecting on these historical challenges is vital in informing future policy directions.

3.1. Local Government Policy

In Bangladesh, local government policies have changed significantly throughout time. Since the nation's independence, several governments—autocratic or democratic—have tried to alter the local government structure to suit their goals, objectives, and political agendas. Although experts, civil society organizations, development partners, political parties, and the bureaucracy all agree that a decentralized local government system is necessary, they frequently cannot agree on how this decentralization should be implemented. As a result, we have seen various policies and local government structures throughout the nation's history. For example, the nation's first elected administration (1972–1975) introduced Union Parishad in addition to local government sector, successive governments did not try to put a brake in changing the focus and locus of SSNPs and these SSNPs, once introduced, have never been abolished at the local level, opted for 'District Governor' system at the Zila (district) level, which it failed to materialize. The Local Government Ordinance, 1976, promulgated by the next government, introduced different local government structures at different levels including Union Parishad at Union level, and Thana Parishad at Thana level. In addition, Swanirvar Gram Sarker (Self-reliant Village Government) was introduced in 1980 which was abolished by a martial law order in 1982. The Upazila Parishad Ordinance of 1982 was the most important ordinance passed by the subsequent administration throughout the 1980s. Thana was promoted to Upazila by this law, and it became the center of elected officials' decentralization initiatives. The next democratically elected national government disbanded the Upazila Parishad without providing a substitute democratic local government system. After taking office in 1996, the Awami League (AL) government attempted to restore the Upazila Parishad, but this effort was short-lived as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led government that followed in 2001 chose a new form of local government. At the village level, the administration implemented Gram Sarkar, which the then-caretaker government eliminated in 2008. Together with other local government organizations like the Union Parishad, City Corporation, and Paurashavas, the Awami League formed the Upazila Parishad and Zila Parishad (through the Upazila Parishad (amended) Act, 2009 and the Zila Parishad Act, 2000) after regaining power in 2009 (Ahmed, T. 2016; Panday 2005; 2011).

3.2. Social Protection

The quantity, reach, and funding of Social Safety Net Programs (SSNPs) in Bangladesh have all grown dramatically over time. The sole safety net mechanism in place at the time of independence was the government service pension system. Since 1974, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has implemented a number of initiatives to assist those affected by outside shocks. The emphasis switched to implementing life-cycle risk support schemes in the late 1980s, and several other safety net initiatives were added in the late 1990s. For example, the AL government only covered 0.04 million individuals when it established the senior allowance in 1998. This initiative was not altered or discontinued by the BNP, which took over the government from AL in 2001. Instead, the program's coverage grew steadily, reaching about 0.13 million individuals in 2005. There are now 23 ministries implementing 145 SSNPs. The SSNPs have also

seen an increase in budgetary allocations over time. For example, in FY 2011, the amount allotted to Social Security Programs (SSPs) climbed from 1.3 percent of GDP in FY 1998 to 2.3 percent. It has since leveled off at about 2.0 percent of GDP. (GoB 2015a). The GOB is currently preparing to execute.

3.3. Nutrition

The Bangladeshi government took a long time to create a national nutrition policy. The 1990s saw a rise in interest in nutrition, and following Bangladesh's 1992 participation in the First International Conference on Nutrition, the first attempt to develop a policy was made. The Food Security and Nutrition Policy was approved in 1997. This policy acknowledged the issue of malnutrition and made the case that guaranteeing access to food would address the nutrition issue. It did not distinguish between therapies that are particular to nutrition and those that are sensitive to it. In 2015, a new National Nutrition Policy was developed. The external environment's signals that the prior strategy was failing and that a new one was needed prompted this policy adjustment.

3.4. Administrative Reforms

Numerous attempts have been made to alter the nation's administrative system since independence. Regardless of their kind (i.e., democratic or bureaucratic) and ideological stance, the successive governments saw the necessity for bureaucratic reform, which was highly demanded in the political sphere. The Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC), established by the AL government from 1996 to 2001, was arguably the most significant of the various reform commissions established by succeeding administrations. In its 2000 report, PARC made recommendations for 30 short-term, 70 short-term, and 37 long-term reforms. The New Public Management (NPM) movement had an impact on these suggestions. Few of the commission's recommendations—such as the introduction of the Citizen's Charter and LAN—were carried out, but the majority of the significant reform ideas—such as the creation of a Senior Management Pool to settle disputes between generalists and specialists, a performance management system, and a cluster-based ministry system—were shelved and never put into practice (GoB 2000). The four-party alliance administration led by the BNP from 2001 to 2006 also showed no interest in putting the PARC's recommendations into practice.

There are notable differences between the four policies that are briefly described. Some policies did not survive government transitions, but others did. Some were shelved, while others were put into action. The subject of why we observe these differences in the processes of policy design and implementation, as well as their stability, is examined in this chapter along with potential solutions. After the introduction, the chapter gives a brief overview of the literature on the function of bureaucracy in the policymaking process and identifies the gaps in knowledge regarding the role of bureaucracy and other stakeholders as well as the variables that influence the stability or changes of a particular policy. A review of policy change and stability based on recent international research is given in section three. In section four, we attempt to propose an alternative model that explains the variances (with regard to changes and stability) of policies in a developing nation setting, drawing on the discussion in sections two and three. The applicability of the suggested model in the policy environment of Bangladesh is explained in Section 5, and the conclusion is presented in Section 6.

3.5. The Role of Bureaucracy in Policymaking

The importance of bureaucracy in the formulation of policy is widely acknowledged in Bangladeshi policy literature. According to these research, the bureaucracy is the most powerful player in the policy-making process and policies are created in a closed space where the bureaucracy applies its knowledge with little input from external parties. However, recent research shows that over the past 20 years, policy space has

progressively expanded, and the bureaucracy now collaborates with external factors such as various experts, development partners, and civil society organizations (CSOs) and values citizen input (Ahmed, N. 2016; Jahan and Shahan 2016). In order to explain the policy process in Bangladesh, these studies have employed a variety of models and approaches to policymaking. They have also determined the following causes for the shift in the approach to policymaking.

Bangladesh has made an effort to adopt a democratic system since 1991. The participation of political players, particularly representatives from the ruling parties, in the policy-making process has been guaranteed by regular elections and power rotation, notwithstanding a number of bumps in the road. It has been suggested that the political party in power in modern-day Bangladesh typically pushes for policies or modifications to existing ones, and the bureaucracy follows their lead when creating policies.

Numerous Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and specialist CSO groups—which concentrate on or specialize in particular policy areas—have grown in number and capability in recent years. This has made these groups' roles more legitimate. As a result, government agencies go to them for assistance when creating complex policy solutions or describing issues.

It is crucial to remember that despite their significance, these fresh analyses and viewpoints on Bangladesh's policymaking process have two significant drawbacks. Firstly, these studies use various models and methodologies to explain Bangladesh's policy process, and while their insights are valuable, we now lack a holistic model to fully examine the country's policy process. Secondly, these studies do not explain policy stability or changes in the Bangladeshi setting. It is now widely accepted that earlier policies were more stable since bureaucracy dominated the process and political actors received less attention while formulating policies. The persistence of these policies was guaranteed by bureaucracy's opposition to reform. As a result, we have only seen slight adjustments. However, the policy process has become more politicized in recent years (since democracy was established in 1991) due to the growing participation of political players (i.e., the ruling parties) in the policy arena. A shift in power brought about new agendas that necessitated sudden policy adjustments since political actors view policies as a tool for advancing their political agenda.

Nevertheless, it is evident from the four case studies presented at the start of this paper that the analysis shouldn't be so straightforward. Political agenda changes over time can be linked to changes in local government policies. It has been stated that local government structures have been viewed by successive political parties as a crucial tool for ensuring client satisfaction, supporting local political actors, and consolidating power. These have prompted the ruling parties to modify local government regulations in order to achieve their political goals.

But if political motive influenced and drove the several rounds of decentralization policy revisions, why did social safety net policies not employ the same tactics and objectives? Why did a safety net program persist and get additional funding after it was implemented? One probable answer is that safety net programs are seen as a crucial instrument for raising funds to assist local political actors. According to studies, political party leaders and activists in rural areas have exploited various SSNPs; as a result, ruling political parties have favored ensuring a consistent flow of money to party supporters via SSNPs (Khuda, 2011; Hossain, 2007). The political parties were not persuaded to alter the SSNPs' general structure by the emphasis on "maintaining status quo." According to this viewpoint, political parties' actions in the policy realm can result in both "change" and "stability," even when they are motivated by political interests. To put it another way, there are subtleties within "political interest" that enable policies to shift or stay the same.

Similar to this, there is a claim that technical policies do not attract the attention of political actors and, as a result, allow bureaucracy and other outside expert groups to formulate policies that remain relatively stable over time. Such policies include the National Nutrition Policy and the National Food Policy of 2006, as well as the GoB's disaster management effort. However, some other technical policies (such as the Education Policy or the Women Development Policy) have experienced significant changes over time. Once more, this is a problem that has not been adequately addressed in Bangladeshi studies to date. Lastly, there is the issue of definition. What the government decides to do and not do is referred to as its policies. According to Anderson (1994: 5), policies are "...purposive courses of action or inaction undertaken by an actor or set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern." This definition makes Anderson's concept of policy very obvious.

However, it is crucial to remember that Bangladeshi policy process literature has primarily concentrated on the "action" portion and has not addressed the reasons behind "inaction." For example, as our example of administrative reform initiatives shows, while academics have noted the GoB's shortcomings in implementing administrative changes and tried to explain why, these debates have not centered on policy. To put it another way, we haven't really made an effort to comprehend the circumstances in which political players choose to create or implement particular policies.

All of these issues are boldly attempted to be addressed in this chapter. However, we do not assert that we have resolved every issue or nuance (or lack thereof) raised above. Instead, we hope that this article will serve as a starting point for creating a thorough model of the policy-making process in the Bangladeshi context. Our primary goal has been to answer the following question: why, in the context of Bangladesh, do policies change or stay the same throughout time?

Our notion of change and stability needs to be qualified because no policy is static. "Stability" refers to policies that are able to withstand political regime transitions, while "change" refers to sudden policy changes, such as those created by one government and then repealed by the next. According to this viewpoint, policies pertaining to women's development, education, and local government are examples of how a particular government's strategy was swiftly changed when a new one took office.

However, we have taken into consideration these instances despite the fact that the Food Safety and Nutrition Policy of 1997 was changed to the National Nutrition Policy in 2015 and the Food Policy of 1980 was changed to the Food Policy of 2006.

5.0. Current Public Policy Landscape
5.2. Key Challenges
1. **Political Instability**: Frequent changes in government and policy direction have led to inconsistencies in public policies, undermining long-term development goals.
2. **Bureaucratic Resistance**: The entrenched bureaucratic processes often resist innovative approaches due to fear of change or lack of capacity.
3. **Social Inequalities**: Persistent poverty, gender inequities, and education disparities pose significant barriers to effective policy implementation.
4. **Environmental Vulnerabilities**: Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, necessitating resilient policy frameworks that can adapt to shifting environmental conditions.

6.0. Opportunities for Change
1. **Democratic Engagement**: Increased civil society involvement and grassroots movements can drive

demand for accountability and better governance.

2. **Technological Advancements**: Leveraging technology for data collection, analysis, and dissemination can enhance the evidence base for policy-making.

3. **International Collaboration**: Engaging with global partners can facilitate knowledge sharing and financial support, promoting best practices in public administration.

7.0. Proposed Modus Operandi: A Framework for Change and Stability

1. Adaptive Governance

To balance change and stability, Bangladesh must adopt adaptive governance strategies that allow for flexibility in policy-making. This can include regular policy reviews, piloting new initiatives, and integrating feedback mechanisms to adjust policies based on real-time data and citizen experiences.

2. Participatory Decision-Making

Involving stakeholders—ranging from local communities to business sectors—in the policy-making process ensures that the needs and aspirations of all segments of society are considered. This participatory approach not only enhances accountability but also fosters collective ownership of policies.

3. Evidence-Based Policy Development

Policies should be grounded in rigorous data analysis and empirical research. Establishing research partnerships with academic institutions and think tanks can facilitate the generation of context-specific insights that inform policy decisions.

4. Capacity Building

Investing in human capital is essential for effective policy implementation. Training programs aimed at enhancing the skills of public officials and civil society leaders can lead to a more competent workforce capable of navigating the complexities of governance.

5. Fostering Stability through Institutional Integrity

Strengthening institutions and ensuring the rule of law are fundamental for maintaining stability. This involves addressing corruption, enhancing transparency, and ensuring that government actions are accountable to the populace.

Conclusion

As Bangladesh steers towards a sustainable future, the interplay between change and stability in public policy will play a crucial role in determining the success of its developmental trajectories. By adopting an adaptive, participatory, and evidence-based approach, the country can cultivate a policy environment that not only responds efficiently to contemporary challenges but also lays the foundation for long-term stability and growth. The proposed modus operandi serves as a roadmap for Bangladesh's public policy, fostering resilience in the face of change while anchoring itself in the stability of its Institutions and societal norms.

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