PUBLIC POLICY AGENDA SETTING IN NIGERIA: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT
Rapid socio-economic development in societies the World over is associated with public policy agenda setting. In recognition of this fact, successive governments in Nigeria have initiated and implemented several policies that are designed to improve the standard of living of the masses and stimulate socio-economic development in the country. These policies or programmes include the Rolling plan; National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS); Vision 20:2020; the 7 Point Agenda etc. However, implementation of these policies has fallen short of improving the lives of the average Nigerians who constitute the target beneficiaries. This paper identifies some of the challenges affecting public policy agenda setting in Nigeria to include inexplicit formulation process; absence of rigorous analysis as a basis for formulating policy; lack of regular training for senior administrators in policy formulation; executive and bureaucratic dominance. The paper argues that these challenges can be overcome only if policy makers identify and repair the weak link in the agenda process. This can be achieved by ensuring that policy agenda setting process is transparent and allows for meaningful participation by the legislature and the people; building the capacity of the civil society organizations and legislators to intervene in the policy agenda process; developing coordinative mechanisms to overcome fragmentation, to aggregate interests, to cope with complexity and take longer and broader perspectives on issues.

KEY WORDS: Public policy; Agenda-setting; socio-economic development.

Introduction
One of the major problems of public policy formulation and implementation in Nigeria is the issue of who sets agenda for developmental programmes. Over the years, several attempts have been made to set out and pursue a clear cut agenda for socio-economic development of the society. During Obasanjo’s administration (military) between 1976 and 1979, he introduced the Green Revolution; Shehu Shagari (between 1979 and 1984) had Operation Feed the Nation; General Buhari (1984 to 1085) had his War Against Indiscipline (WAI); General Babangida had his Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) between 1985 and 1993. With Obasanjo’s civilian administration (1999 to 2007), it was the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS).

When President Yar’Adua took office in 2007, he promised Nigerians in his inaugural speech that his government would be centred on the Rule of Law. This later metamorphosed into the 7-Point Agenda.
The foregoing is an indication of the fact that successive governments in Nigeria have long realised the importance of Agenda Setting in effective policy formulation and implementation for socio-economic development. Nevertheless, Nigerians have increasingly questioned the workability of these agenda. There seems to be more effort (in most instances) at sloganeering than making impact on the life of the average Nigerians. This paper seeks to identify the challenges of public policy agenda setting (especially in Nigeria) by providing an explanation on how public policy agenda are formed both nationally and globally. The paper is divided into four sections. Section one comprises introduction and the meaning of public policy. Section two examines the phrase “public policy agenda” and identifies reasons that make certain policy issues to be part of policy agenda at the expense of others. Section three identifies actors in public policy agenda setting and highlights the challenges of agenda setting in Nigeria. Section four consists of conclusion and recommendations.

**Conceptual clarification**

**Public Policy**

Despite the fact that examples of public policy come readily to mind, defining public policy in clear and unambiguous term is not easy. One of the reasons for this of course is the fact that, the perception of the meaning, impact and significance of public policy may vary with the perspective of participants and observers. Also, the inter-disciplinary nature of the concept consist another problem. The result of this problem is that academics continue to contemplate the definition of public policy, since there is currently no consensus.

Sharkansky (1978) commenced his analytical consideration of the subject matter of (public) policy on the premise that the term “public policy is ambiguous”. He sees it as a proposal, an on-going programme, the goals of a programme, major decisions, or refusal to make certain decision”. He further argued that:

*It would be misleading to specify one definition of public policy (at any particular time) …but the context in which the term is used should indicate the intended meaning (Sharkansky, 1978).*

The major problem with Sharkansky’s analysis is that policy is viewed to be same as plan, and programme which other scholars tend to differentiate. Starling (1979) distinguished between policy, plan and programme as follows:

1. **Policy** - Lofty goals or ideas that are vague in nature. These broad statements of intention by the government attempt to specify the ideals, visions, dreams and utopian aspirations of the society. They identify the goals that could serve as a general guide for human action, but such goals are not necessarily attainable in the concrete sense. For example, following the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1978, the World Health Assembly (under the auspices of the World Health Organisation (WHO) championed the goal of achieving health for all citizens by the year 2000. Subsequently, many countries including Nigeria incorporated into their respective national health policies this slogan of achieving health for all by the year 2000. Even the originators of this idea knew fully well that it was not possible that there could be any human society by the set date that could get rid of all forms of disease and infirmity. Yet were motivated by the slogan to ginger their people into aspiring for an improvement in the quality of their health care.

2. **Plan** - A plan which in strict sense refers to development plan implies the specification of achievable objectives within the context of a given policy. In essence, plan gives policy practical relevance. Metaphorically, the goals contained in a policy statement are like a destination, and a plan serves as the road network that could guide the government in reducing such a destination. In respect of the health policy referred to above, the plan would attempt to specify the objectives of curing prevalent diseases and preventing the occurrence of new ones.

3. **Programme** - A set of specified actions or activities that are carried out with a view to achieving stated objectives. From the earlier example on health policy, in order to achieve the objective of curing prevalent diseases, one programme that could be designed is that which would promote curative services. This can take the form of hospital expansion programme with the primary intention of enhancing people’s accessibility to healthcare. It could also take the form of drug subsidisation programme for designated diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and poliomyelitis. Similarly, its objective of preventing the occurrence and spread of communicable diseases such as poliomyelitis, whooping cough, tuberculosis, etc.
could be achieved by designing a national programme on immunisation (NPI) as was done in Nigeria as part of 1989 national health policy (Dlakwa, 2009). However, in order to ensure value for money spent on programmes and facilitate proper accountability to the communities covered, development programmes have to be complemented by properly designed and executed projects.

(4) Project - A project specifies concrete targets within the context of defined objectives, which constitute a component of programme. It is a specific action, taken at a specific time, to provide specific service to a specific group of people over a specific period and within a specific geographic location (Gittinger, 1972).

It is clear from the foregoing analysis that each of the four concepts possesses peculiar elements that could distinguish it from the others. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that the line between them is very thin. For a policy to be translated into reality, specific plans need to be designed. Programmes are designed as operational aspects of development plan. Similarly, a well-conceived public policy could fail if the specific projects and the programmes designed to implement it were faulty.

Given the above discourse, public policy is conceived in this paper as “the strategies undertaken by governmental agencies to solve public problems; authoritative decisions that are intended to direct or influence the actions, behaviours, or decisions of others. There are many reasons that can prompt the initiation and implementation of a public policy. Hughes (1998) identified the reasons for public policy formulation and implementation as follows:

(i) **Problem Solving**: Government formulate policies in order to provide solution to problem(s) affecting the public. Although in doing this, a distinction should be made between what is public interest and what is government interest. What is government interest may be incompatible with the public interest. Whether public or governmental interest, both actions would be deemed to be public policy making.

(ii) **Acceleration of Economic Development**: Public policies involve planning especially at the implementation stage. If planning is part of public policy making and economic development involves planning, logically policy making is an instrument of economic development.

(iii) **Continuity in Administration**: This is in line with the “theory of continuity of policy process”. In theory of continuity of policy process, it is believed that government comes, government goes but public administration remains forever.

(iv) **Fulfilment of Public Interest**: Government formulates policies in order to better the conditions of the populace.

(v) **Fulfilment of Selfish Ends of Government**: This is to say government’s survival depends on the effective initiation and implementation of public policies.

Egonmwan (1991) classified public policies into the following:

(i) **Distributive Policies**: These are actually favours, benefits or patronage policies, dispensed to a small number of people on a continual basis e.g. housing and distribution of essential commodities like fertiliser, rice, etc.

(ii) **Redistribution Policies**: Involve taking of benefits or resources from some people and giving to others. The gain of one is the loss of the other. They benefit a particular segment or category of the population, such as the unemployed, homeless, disadvantaged, the poor, the retired, etc.

(iii) **Regulatory Policies**: Involve setting of standards and rules to restrict the activities of some groups in the society in order to prevent undesired consequences of their action. Such rules and regulations benefit some people and inhibit others e.g. Land Use Act, Professional Practice Laws, Labour Law – all intended to control the activities of some groups in Nigeria – architects, engineers, medical doctors, lawyers, etc.

(iv) **Emotive-Symbolic Policies**: Policies designed to serve latent rather than manifest policy purposes for the political system. A policy decision to award national honours to deserving citizens is an example of a symbolic policy. Such award satisfies the socio-psychological need of recognition for the individual. Again government often formulates certain policies with no intention of executing them as designed but simply to make people “feel good”. For example, granting of formal recognition in the preamble of a legislation– “freedom of speech for all”, “equality before the law” and “freedom of movement”.

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Public Policy Agenda Setting

Agenda setting is the first phase, the issue sorting stage in the policy process during which some concerns rise to the attention of policy makers while others receive minimal attention or are neglected completely (Shiffman, 2009). Agenda setting is therefore, the process or behaviour to adopt a social issue or problem as a policy problem; in the process, social issue or problem is chosen as a governmental issue.

In every society, there are individuals, groups, associations and interest groups, which exist because of one reason or the other. They are always out to get proper and adequate attention from the policy makers. They adopt different methods (especially lobbying) towards this end. However, due to the fact that resources available in any society are inadequate to meet the pressing demands of groups and individuals, governments only select few demands for consideration at a particular point in time apparently from the most skilful and powerful group in society. Therefore, “those demands that are chosen or those on which decision makers are compelled to act constitute policy agenda (Olaniyi, 2001).

Policy agenda setting can be differentiated from policy priorities. According to Kingdon (1984) policy agenda entails a list of subjects that are getting attention whereas policy priority is a subset of issues on public policy agenda which are “up for active decision”. A policy priority denotes a ranking of agenda items which some regarded as more important or pressing than others (Anderson, 1975). It is akin to the notion of scale of preference in economics which explains a situation whereby a consumer ranks his preferences in order of priorities. The agenda setting process is an on-going competition among issue proponents to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites.

Policy agenda are multifarious and different, depending on whether they are general to the state or nation or whether they are specific, limited or located in specific segment or governmental agencies. In sum, a policy agenda can either be systematic or institutional. Systematic or Macro Agenda include the widest range of potential issues that might be considered for action by the government and that might be placed on the public agenda e.g. vision 20-20-20. Institutional or Micro Agenda on the other hand include those issues that are already for consideration of decision makers, legislatures or court e.g. Freedom of Information Bill (FOI), 2011 election. Etc.

It is important to mention at this point that, policy agenda does not usually appear as a listing of a priority scale of problems; neither does it refer to a set of documented paper on public problems receiving attention. Rather it refers to all issues and problems that receive attention either in discussions, speeches, memoranda, legislative motions, etc. An issue or theme can become part of policy agenda in any or combination of the following:

1. **Political Changes:** Presumably, people seek political office so as to introduce new ideas and innovative solutions, and if elected, they can use the power of their office to influence public policy. Political leaders can therefore seize on a particular problem with a desire to secure political advantages, concern for public interest or both; publicise such problem and propose solution. In the developing countries, most policies emanate from the political leadership rather than from the people. In Nigeria for example, the president and the members of the Federal Executive Council (FEC), can and often set the pace of the agenda.

2. **Event Must be Spectacular:** For a problem to enter the policy agenda of decision makers, certain spectacular events could happen to trigger off wide public reaction and attract the attention of large number of people. In such a situation, public officials are likely to feel compelled to respond. For example, the continual ethno-religious crisis in Jos (Plateau State) compelled the federal government to set up a commission of enquiry with a view to finding a permanent solution to the crisis.

3. **Role of the Media:** Through their reportage, the electronic and print media are important opinion shapers and could help to structure the political agenda in any of the following ways:
   (i) By converting issues or problems into agenda items;
   (ii) By giving salience to certain issues already on the agenda.

   The fierce battle fought by the Nigerian media against the “third term” ambition of the then president Olusegun Obasanjo in 2007 eventually led to its abortion by the National Assembly.

4. **Collective Action of Interest Groups, Protest, Lobby, Social Movements around a Particular Topic:** One other means of bringing problems to the attention of policy makers is through protest, violence and riots. The violent protest by the Niger Delta youths against the
Federal Government of Nigeria on account of marginalisation of the Niger Delta region led to the establishment of the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs, as a measure to address infrastructure and development needs of the region. The protest also compelled late president Yar’Adua to include Niger Delta as an issue in his 7-Point Agenda.

5. **Values, Beliefs or Motivations can Turn a Condition or Situation Into a Problem:** Whether or not some problems will gain access to the policy agenda depends on the culture of the people. For example, while prostitution is an offence punishable by death through stoning in Iran, institutionalised prostitution is common place in London. Thus, prostitution in United Kingdom may not be seen as a social problem requiring solution – policy.

6. **Role of International Organisations:** As a result of conditionalities usually imposed for obtaining facilities from international agencies like World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), International Labour Organisation (ILO), third world countries including Nigeria are often persuaded to initiate and adopt policies and programmes to meet such conditions. In some African countries, where structural adjustment has been embarked upon, policy initiatives have always followed conditions set down by World Bank, the IMF or both. Such conditions often include attainment of realistic exchange rate, a restrictive monetary policy, trade liberalisation, reduction in size of public service and improved revenue base. In Nigeria, the World Bank loan for the Agricultural Development Project (ADP) was procured after specific policies and programmes dictated by the World Bank had been put in place. With regard to SAP, many policy measures were adopted which included new trade and exchange rate policies, new tariff regimes, and the reform of the civil service. It is therefore clear that through the imposition of certain conditions by international agencies for obtaining the facilities and the desire to benefit from such facilities by the third world countries, international agencies and their experts serve as sources of policy initiatives in these countries.

Similarly, there are also reasons that account for why some issues don’t become part of public policy agenda. These are:

1. **Problem Definition:** If intentions are not spelt out clearly through the right original channels established for transmission of policy to those involved in policy formulation, then the issue/problem will not make it to the policy agenda.

2. **Crowded Out (by Other Issues):** A crisis or an event does not automatically get into the policy agenda but needs to be treated as a “positive purposive process in itself”. Consequently, substantial effort and continuity of efforts is required to get the issue into the policy agenda.

3. **Problem Not Recognised as a Relevant Issue/Problem:** The selective discrimination of policy issues is often dependent on what the decision makers regard as a policy agenda. Thus what the public perceive as an important policy issue may not be regarded as such by policy decision makers. Consequently, it will not be in the policy agenda.

4. **Deemed Not to be a Legitimate State Concern:** Generally, a problem/issue that falls within the framework of the ruling party’s manifesto is bound to receive the attention of the political executives. Consequently, the chances of such an issue making it to the policy agenda will be higher than those that fall outside the party’s manifesto.

5. **Non-Decision Making:** Previous action and policy rules may automatically limit the choice of policy makers. This is often the case with situations where there are specific standard operating procedures. Where there is a standard operating procedure, it becomes extremely difficult for policy actors to deviate from the established thought pattern.

**Actors in Policy Agenda Setting**

Many individuals and institutions are involved in shaping public policy agenda. These include political officials (executives), legislators, bureaucrats (administrators), judicial functionaries, interest groups, special commissions/panels, international organisations, etc.

1. **Political Executives:** These include the president, his chief aides and advisers in the presidency. They constitute the major source of initiative in the development of policy proposals at the national level. The president is expected to give both legislative and executive leadership and substantially determines the effectiveness of government. The president makes policy recommendations to the National Assembly and provides it with draft bills containing
his recommendations. In other words, the president is constantly looked upon not only for executive leadership but also for legislative leadership, thus reinforcing the pivotal and central role of the president in public policy agenda setting.

The governors of the various states, their chief aides and advisers also play a great role in the development of policy proposals in various policy areas.

2. **Legislators:** Legislators in the National Assembly (Senate and House of Representative) contribute significantly to policy formation through a number of channels. Apart from their own interests and activities, the legislators receive suggestions for formulating alternative courses of action on policy issues from:
   (i) Contacts with various administrative officials and interest group representatives.
   (ii) Hearing and investigations in cases of misappropriation of public funds, or a threat to order and good government.
   (iii) Determine major policy issues like revenue sharing formula, state creation, boundary adjustments, etc.

3. **Bureaucrats:** Bureaucrats can be involved in the policy agenda setting in any or a combination of the following:
   (i) They can be called upon to assist the collection of data (fact) and information about policy issues/problems (or proposals).
   (ii) They assist in the preparation, the drafts of policy proposals. That is, they help to determine policy objectives.

4. **Judicial Functionaries:** Individuals who decide on cases in courts of law (adjudication). Their involvement in policy agenda setting is seen in any or a combination of the following ways:
   (i) They serve as chairmen of special commissions (bodies) constituted to conduct inquiries into some public problems in the society. The findings (recommendations) of such bodies are often adopted by government for future action.
   (ii) They help to resolve impasse which may arise from the ambiguity of constituted provisions (interpretation). Their decisions (judgements) are often adopted as future interpretations of such sections. Also their judgements often reflect recommendations in the form of calling on the legislators to review or re-evaluate such sections or policies respectively.

5. **Interest Groups:** Interest groups can be described as those associations which are out to influence government policies to the advantage of either members or a policy (ideology) they seek to promote. The latter part of the definition shows that the activities of an interest group may not have a direct effect on its members. Interest groups can be in the form of political, economic, cultural, educational, etc. associations. Any time a policy is to be formulated by the political executives, or any other actor, an interest group will be out to ensure that such a policy does not contradict its interest. On the other hand, an interest group can even initiate the formulation of a particular policy which will be in its interest. This it does through the law makers or appropriate agent. Towards this end, an interest group adopts methods like lobbying, making representation, submitting memoranda, etc. to drive home its demands.

6. **Specific Commissions/Panels:** Bodies constituted by the government to investigate certain policy issues or make proposals on certain policy matters. At the expiration of their sittings, they always make a number of suggestions which are usually included in their reports submitted to the government. Such suggestions always influence the policy action of government in future. This is often reflected in the form of legislations which are often prohibitory in nature.

**Challenges of Public Policy Agenda Setting in Nigeria**

The following factors constitute challenges to public policy agenda setting in Nigeria:

1. **Inexplicit Formulation Process:** In Nigeria like many other African countries, interest aggregating structures like political parties and other interest groups are not active and effective in policy formulation, as in developed countries like United States of America (USA), United Kingdom, Germany, etc. The contribution of interest groups to policy formulation cannot be overemphasised. Generally, in Nigeria, the open clash of interests between groups that shape policy formulation is minimal if not lacking. Power is often
concentrated in the ruling elites who formulate policies in accordance with their own understanding of policy issues, and the interest of the small ruling elite and their associates. Thus, the focus is usually on executors of policies by those affected as they hardly know of proposed policy during formulation in contrast to the developed countries where citizens’ focus is on legislation. The process of policy agenda setting in Nigeria is therefore, to a large extent not open and as explicit as that in developed countries.

2. **Willingness to Accept More Analysis as Bias for Policy Formulation in Some Areas Especially Where External Resources are Involved and Willingness to Allow Analysis to Play any Role in Some Other Cases:** As mentioned elsewhere, international agencies and their experts are sources of policy initiatives in Nigeria. In many instances, the prescriptions of the IMF and World Bank require the installation of better economic management methods by countries seeking to benefit from their facilities. This requirement calls for analysis as basis for formulating policy options to meet IMF and World Bank induced reforms. The experience in Nigeria has shown that policy formulation is hardly based on any rigorous analysis. Intuition, common sense, personal, religious and ethnic considerations hold sway in policy formulation particularly in such areas as distribution of communal benefits or establishment of industries.

3. **Lack of Training for Senior Administrators in Policy Formulation** - Public policy agenda setting in Nigeria is also faced with the problem of shortage of public sector senior administrators trained in policy formulation. Thus there is need for training to strengthen the capacity of public sector senior administrators in priority setting and policy making. Although the National Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPS), Kuru, Jos is training high level public sector managers in policy making, its annual intake is still few compared with need.

4. **Neglect of Implementation Analysis While Formulating Policies** - The numbers of abandoned projects and policy abortions prevalent in Nigeria point to the fact that policy implementation is a big problem facing the country. Yet there is a general tendency by policy makers to ignore planning of implementation process during policy formulation. It is necessary to anticipate and analyse the varying roles to be played by beneficiaries, producers, consumers and unintended victims.

   In people-oriented policies like health, education and rural development, implementation becomes more difficult if support and resistance of the people are not studied in advance and planned for. Compared with the provision of infrastructure in a community, people-oriented programmes tend to be more difficult to implement as they seek to effect fundamental behavioural changes on the part of the people.

5. **Executive and Bureaucratic Dominance:** The constitutional responsibilities of the legislative arm as enshrined in the 1999 constitution include law-making, representation, executive oversight and the making of public policy in general terms. The power of the legislature in budgeting oversight clearly shows that if the legislature takes its work seriously, it is the undisputable leader in public policy agenda setting process.

In practice however, the executive tends to dominate the policy process using all manner of tricks and advantages on its side. This situation is partly the legacy of decades of military rule which has had the effect of eroding constitutional federalism by its centralisation of power and resources, the violation of the rights of citizens, the erosion of the culture of the rule of law, and the enthronement of a culture of arbitrariness and impunity resulting in high levels of corruption.

**Conclusion**

Agenda setting is a critical stage in the policy making process in any given nation. It is therefore, useful to consider explicitly how public policy agenda are formed both nationally and globally. Doing so reminds us that resources are scarce, not all needs can be met, and factors beyond national deliberation and careful consideration of evidence shape the process. The discussion on why and how issues make it to policy agenda as well as actors in public policy agenda setting provide more understanding of agenda setting process in Nigeria. Ideas from each of them help in advancing our limited knowledge of how public policy agenda are formed, and what actors may do to alter public policy priorities. Most importantly, the discussion on the challenges of agenda setting is a call on policy decision makers to develop strategies that can improve public policy agenda setting in Nigeria.
Recommendations

Overcoming the challenges of public policy agenda setting in Nigeria requires that policy makers identify and repair the weak link in the policy agenda process. The elements of a sound policy process must be kept in mind. These include:

1. Policy agenda setting process should be transparent and allow for meaningful participation by the legislature and the people. The participation of individuals and groups in the process is very significant. Groups for instance, may release analysis on issues known to be under consideration, or that they believe ought to be priorities, with the hope of influencing the policy being formulated.

2. Public policy agenda should seek to promote basic rights.

3. There is a need to build the capacity of the civil society organisations and legislators to intervene in the policy agenda setting process.

4. Develop coordinative mechanisms to overcome fragmentation, to aggregate interests, to cope with complexity and to take longer and broader perspectives on issues.

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