

THE PUBLIC POLICY QUESTION IN PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

The Public Policy Question is an ensemble of substantive national policy questions searching for rational, feasible, synergistic and enduring models of diagnosing, framing and solving the socioeconomic problems confronting the nations. Across generations, scholarly literature has underscored the importance of priming the ideals of transparency, accountability, sustainability, innovation, inclusivity, evidence-based research, policy learning, and inter-generational thinking into institutional processes and practices to enable public policies to fulfil their mandates as hubs of national development (Mullen, 2016; Hogan, Howlett & Murphy, 2022). The achievement of development targets across all spheres of the economy, be it industry, manufacturing, agriculture, education, tourism, health and mining, directly hinges on the nature and quality of public policies. In fact, it is inconceivable to anticipate national development outside of public policies. Public policies regulate, allocate and distribute critical national resources among all competing players in the economy. Public policies also serve as instruments of conflict management by harnessing and balancing competing societal values and interests. The Public Policy Question is thus fundamentally a search for policy-making models that can transform and sustain the welfare of the economy and citizens in the long term.

A study of this nature invariably requires clarity on the concepts of 'state' and 'government' as both directly have a bearing on public policy. Government is the 'institutional and sovereign expression' of the state, in essence, one of the seven dimensions of a state that include territoriality, sovereignty, nationality, a set of institutions (or government), a global player, a legal system, and an idea (Young, 1988:30). While the state is broader than government, the book conveniently uses the terms 'public policy' and 'state policy' interchangeably to infuse a long-range focus to the Public Policy Question that goes beyond the short-term life span of a government. A good public policy is consistent with the seven dimensions of a state. It protects the state as a territory, sovereignty, nation, government and as a global player. A good policy is also fidel to existing legislations (Munger, 2000:8). The Public Policy Question is thus a protracted search for government policies that reflect intergenerational concerns of fairness and justice to both present and future generations. In Africa, public policies are expected to serve as the main instruments for spearheading the long-term development agendas of the post-colonial state

that relate to stable and secure political order, the consolidation of economic growth and equitable development, nation building, and state capacity building (Sachikonye & Kaulemu, 2021; Nzongola-Ntalaja, 1987; Mkandawire, 2001; Ali, 2014).

Equally visible in generational policy literature are warnings to society about the 'double-edged' nature of public policies (Grindle, 1980; Wildavsky, 2006). Depending on the nature of decision making in the polity, public policies can impact positively or negatively on national development. The fact that public policies are formulated and implemented by government institutions and are clothed with the authority of the sovereign state does not automatically make them developmental. Government and national interests may or may not correspond. Some policies may be fronted as public-driven when they in reality seek to secure the hidden hegemonic interests of those in power. Policy literature routinely refers to cases in which well-intentioned government policies morphed into 'private' policies on the implementation front, captured or hijacked by powerful forces within the polity to pursue hidden private interests and even serving as fronts for dispensing patronage (Hupe, 2014; Labuschagne, 2017; Fiebekorn, 2019; Makinde, 2005; Tangri, 1989). These covert agendas, although not explicitly stated in the content of policy documents, have decisive influence on policy delivery. Consequently, this study would question likely gaps between the espoused policy intents and policy actions.

Underlined in these introductory remarks is that the Public Policy Question embodies delicate, long-standing, and intractable policy questions. The Public Policy Question is hardly a twenty-first century phenomenon but an inter-generational question. Various forms of government – from antiquity to the present – have had their respective versions of the Public Policy Question. Pre-colonial states, as argued by Caiden (1982) and Gutkind (1963), cited in Lungu (1993:5-6), had developed codes of conduct anchored on citizen responsibility. In ancient Greece, 'city states' (*poleis*) served as platforms in which citizens would discuss the knotty problems of the states and search for feasible solutions. These concerns also inspired Aristotle's *Politics* and Plato's *Republic*, whose preoccupations were with finding values and ethics that should form the basis for creating responsible states in which citizens have opportunities to participate in the processes of their polities. In fact, as argued by Roddey, Christol and Anderson (1983:28), participation in the political and policy processes of the city states was so highly regarded that those who took 'no interest in politics' were viewed as 'idiots'. The reasoning was that government policies affect everyone, whether in the public or private domain. Consequently, participation in the public affairs of the polity was deemed the natural right of all citizens. This book's chapters should question the extent to which citizens participate actively in the specific policies under review.

These substantive concerns have also been at the heart of the African development discourses since the onset of independence in the late 1950s. Bratton (1981:452) referred to a "ZANUPF leadership constituting a thin veneer atop a largely untransformed state

apparatus". Rothchild and Chazan (1988:7) lamented "the precarious balance in state and society relations in Africa". Nzongola-Ntalaja (1987:42-87) highlighted the national policy imperatives of political stability, economic independence and nation building confronting African states at the dawn of independence. Herbst (1990:30) observed that the Black Government "took over a bruised but not defeated, settler state which contained powerful anachronistic elements that were hostile to the political project of the new regime".

Inspiring these fundamental national policy questions was the state of the African economy at the onset of independence and the predispositions of the new political leadership to cause ruptures with the colonial past. The new African nation states had inherited economic systems with a dual pattern pitting the well-developed urban and commercial agricultural sector ('the jewel enclave') and an underdeveloped rural sector where the bulk of the Black population resided (Mandaza, 1986; Grindle, 1980; Rodney, 1982; Tangri, 1989; Kanyenze, Kondo, Chitambara & Martens, 2011). The inherited professional bureaucracies were generally too small and inappropriately constituted to serve as the drivers of the development agendas of the new nation states, while foreign ownerships were firmly entrenched in all key economic sectors of the economy.

Cursory reviews of twenty-first century Africa suggest that the extent to which government decisions are made according to the preferences of the leaders and citizens is still unclear. Scholars on African studies note with concern that despite its rich endowment in natural resources, Africa is still struggling to wield full ownership over its natural resources and policy systems (Mkandawire, 2001; Bond, 1998; Sachikonye & Kaulemu, 2021; Banji, 2014; Ali, 2014; Bothale, 2013). In reference to Zimbabwe, Sachikonye (2021:46) observes that while Zimbabwe is richly endowed with natural resources, it is yet to exploit them to create wealth for the majority of its citizens. Most of the substantive national policy questions relating to resources ownership, sovereignty, debt sustainability, political stability, national security, economic development, nation building, and state capacity building remain unresolved. Economies remain largely export-oriented, the bulk of materials exported raw, while access to housing, land, water, health and education, among others, remains extremely stressed. With a few exceptions, state pre-occupation has remained primarily concerned with the maintenance of law and order. The impression is that there has not been a radical change in states' goals-orientation from emphasis on order maintenance under colonialism to an emphasis on development after independence. Across Africa, the state is emerging as a major prize, the key object of intra-class struggles and the avenue for wealth accumulation by virtue of its extensive control over economic resources. In politics, state power is largely a zero-sum game, as being in or out of power has serious consequences for one's well-being and business prospects. Tangri's (1989) observation that state enterprises in Africa have failed to become the axis of the development agenda because they are in the main run as avenues of personal enrichment still holds to this date.