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**Problems and policy**

Public policy should solve society’s problems. However, this ostensibly plausible depiction can mask serious problems with how societal ‘problems’ are framed and then addressed. A dim view of public policy’s capacity to solve societal problems is vividly captured in Ernest Benn’s assertion that politics is “the art of looking for trouble, finding it whether it exists or not, diagnosing it incorrectly, and applying the wrong remedy.” One way of offsetting Benn’s pessimistic schema is to assign importance to carefully deliberating and defining the issues or problems that policy seeks to address.

The process of solving societal problems begins with recognizing and defining the problem. If something is defined and described as a public problem, then it is being recognized as something to be fixed by policymakers and legislators. Defining and describing a problem portends important consequences. In fact, the framing of a problem can be critical in eventually leading to a particular kind of solution.

Defining or framing a problem will usually provide a focus and may point towards causality. The description of the problem may also highlight segments of the population, geographical areas and certain types of institutions that need to be focused upon. It can also signal urgency and assign priority. The framing, very importantly, places a certain perspective on the problem by linking it to certain societal values and grand narratives.

The representation or misrepresentation of public problems is an activity that occurs in abundance and at various levels of policy decision-making. The nature of public problems and solutions can be diverse and range from the small-scale local projects such as filling potholes on a kilometer long stretch of rural road in the vicinity of a small town to large-scale cross-regional mega-projects such as constructing thousands of kilometers of new multi-lane highways connecting cities and regions.

The framing or the social construction of a public problem is in many ways a political activity; therefore, a key player in such matters is usually the elected policy-maker. A politician is guided in legislative and policy endeavors by his or her assumptions, values and personal interests. Politicians have an advantage when it comes to playing a prominent role in defining a societal problem. The advantage comes from their public positions that provide them a formally defined role in public decision-making processes. They also have access to public funding, they can garner access to the media and when they attempt to define and solve society’s problems they are seen to be doing what is expected of them.

In addition to legislators, many other actors can also be influential in defining and describing a society’s problems. These actors could include business leaders; public intellectuals, policy experts; religious scholars, organized groups such as labour unions (which are not too influential in Pakistan); civil society organizations, etc.

In developing countries, like Pakistan, issues abound and the resources needed to address issues are very scarce. Here it is critical to recognize that if an issue becomes a key public policy concern, then the resources it will gather will come at the cost of other issues that will remain unaddressed. So, the decision on according importance, and eventually public funds, to an issue will have consequences in terms of other issues that remain unfunded or underfunded.

A preliminary step to questioning the setting of the public agenda or proffering a description of critical public problems is that we must question why and how an issue, to begin with, emerges as a problem. Why, for example, was it essential to build Mangla Dam in the 1960s, or why was it critical for Pakistan to build a steel mill in the 1970s, or why suddenly was it crucial to build a several hundred kilometer long multi-lane motorway in the 1990s?

The reason for questioning these projects is not because these projects are without benefit but that the act of questioning and debating opens the door to improving public policy decisions from a primarily top-down model to a more inclusive model.

One starting point involves taking a position that does not assume that what is purported as a public problem worthy of addressing is beyond scrutiny. When deliberating and scrutinizing any public issue a few basic questions that can be very useful include: Who is deciding what is a problem and, once an issue gets on to the list of public problems, how does it move up or down the list of priorities?

Further questions can include: who is affected, who was consulted etc. There are also serious questions related to benefits and losses, and who stands to lose and to what extent? Another set of critical questions relate to what nature of good reasoning, or lack of, was publicly provided to address this problem and what methodological limitations were built into the research and evaluation process?

Even though there can be a fair amount of subjectivity attached to the assessing and projecting of policy problems and their subsequent solutions, one measure of examining the assessment is to look at the empirical data that is used to support a problem description. Along with quantitative methods, qualitative methods can also be very important in soliciting a broad-based input into the scrutinizing process. Major stakeholders need to be involved meaningfully in public deliberative processes. The involvement can come through a public debate that is accessible to a broad audience, such as wide-ranging discussions on the traditional or the newer social media. The involvement can also come through a structured research design that involves focus group discussions, qualitative interviewing and representative survey research. Participative and deliberative forums such as Town Hall meetings, citizen’s assembly etc can also be conducted.

There is also a need to deeply probe problem construction and the framing of major public and collective issues because the roots of a particularly skewed problem framing may be intertwined with entrenched structures of elite privilege. In such instances, the framing of an issue enables deflection of focus from the elitist power structures of society.

In many countries, particularly developing countries, where major public policy decisions are generally made in a top-down manner it can be widely beneficial to scrutinize how societal issues are socially constructed and framed.

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