Public Policy and Design: an Interdisciplinary Approach to Improve Policy Performance

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Abstract

‘Policy sciences’ according to Lasswell (1971) is a framework to set the process of comprehensive, integrated understanding concerned with policy. However this integrated understanding requires an interdisciplinary approach to deal with the complex problems. Governments are expected to deliver large number of social good for growth, stability and development of society and to ensure that they make equally large number of public policies. Thus, public policy comprises of both - the intent of the government and its wherewithal to execute. Brooks (1989) explains public policy as the broad framework of ideas and values within which decisions are taken and action or inaction is pursued by governments for solving complex and conflicting problems. However, problem solving through policies is often fraught with irrationality, inconsistencies and lack of coordination (Wu, Ramesh et.al: 2013). The complex nature of policy design and execution requires an interdisciplinary approach of problem solving. Can design intervention be one? Can the intervention of design’s creativity, innovation, ideation and hands on skill make the host of public policies viz. mid-day meal, transportation, urbanization, health, education and the rest more rational and effective? This paper discusses how the strategies of design may also be used at various stages of policy cycle to make public policies more effective.

Keywords: public policy, design, creativity, innovation, systems thinking, interdisciplinary
Introduction
Contrary to the common belief of being an aesthetic pursuit, design too is a process of solving problems. Design process discovers and defines problem, develops options then delivers. Besides hands on skills to create, design also involves different strategic processes of problem solving such as critical, creative and systems thinking, innovation and execution at different stages. Critical thinking involves reasoning and decision making, determining how best various alternatives meet some criteria.

Creative thinking is the process of generating options and hypotheses that meet some criteria; develop ideas unique, useful and worth further elaboration. Systems thinking helps understand systems (a set of elements standing in interrelation – Bokalanffy, 1968) in a social context. In design problem solving goes through a complete cycle before offering creative and innovative solution.

Public policies being the fundamental principles underpinning the set of rules and regulations are applicable to host of social, moral, economic, ecological and other aspects of the society. As they cover a wide gamut of issues: law, public health, transportation, urbanization, manufacturing, sanitation, environment, education, design to name a few, policy design and execution require an interdisciplinary approach. Solving complex and dynamic societal problems often require a more interdisciplinary than focused method. Palmer (2001) says: ‘Knowledge has been in a state of flux – a continual process of reconfiguration.’ He further states: ‘The real-world research problems that scientists address rarely arise within orderly disciplinary categories, and neither do their solutions.’ In such situations interdisciplinary approach becomes immensely relevant as it helps comprehensively appreciate and resolve issues of complex nature. Interdisciplinary is not just about any kind of dialogue between the two or more disciplines rather a more intense convergence of different disciplines which addresses the challenges of complexity.
It’s in this context that we need to analyse what the application of design process can do to make policies a reflection of people’s aspirations and enhance the policy impact. Policies have their own complexities and overarching impact as policy in one sector significantly impacts other sectors. For example, the policy of environment regulating vehicular emission and setting a minimum benchmarking for fuel efficiency may influence automobile sector and eventually to automobile design. Similarly, the recent policy of FDI in retail in India may influence economy and also to the process of design for the retail sector. Not only that, a policy may have different objectives to fulfill which require application of different knowledge and skill sets. For example: the objective of Mid-Day Meal (MDM) programme is to ‘boost universalization of primary education and to impact the nutritional intake of students in primary classes.’ (Deodhar, Mahandiratta et al. 2010). MDM policy can be taken up as a case study for design intervention in public policy.

**Mid-Day Meal Programme**

Sheer enormity of scale makes India’s MDM world’s largest school feeding programme. In the year 2012-13 the scheme received a central budgetary allocation of Rs. 10867.90 crore to feed 12 crore children in approximately 12.65 lakh schools throughout the country. This policy of ‘social altruism’ reaffirms Indian government’s commitment towards the Millennium Development Goal of universal primary education for children. But in developing nations which also suffer from instances of abject poverty, affording cost of education is often a deterrent. Mexico, South Africa, Bangladesh among others also have policies similar to MDM which relate food and nutrition to education. In Mexico it’s called PROGRESA (Programa de Educación, Salud y Alimentación). Initiated in 1997 it provides cash incentives to rural households on the condition of satisfactory school attendance of their children. Bangladesh’s Food-for-Education program has also positively impacted children’s participation in school. It has led to 17.3 percent increase in attendance rate for boys and 16 percent increase for girls on an average. Under constitutional obligation South Africa’s National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) 1994 provides access to quality food and basic nutrition besides good basic education as stipulated in its National Educational Policy. It covered 20,815 primary and secondary schools in 2011 and fed 8,281,927 students for 182 days as per the NSNP annual report. The impact has been phenomenal.

The rationale of MDM for the school going children in India is unquestionable. There’re 577,000 kitchens set up under National Programme For Nutrition Support to Primary Education and 24 lakh cooks all over the country to feed 12 crore children. Planning Commission’s Approach Paper for 12th Plan period (2012-17) summarizes that percentage of children in rural areas under 6 to 14 years not enrolled in school dropped from 6.6 percent in 2005 to 3.5 percent in 2010. The proportion of girls in the age group 11 to 14 years not attending schools also declined from 11.2 per cent in 2005 to 5.9 percent in 2010; all these largely due to the MDM programme. However, despite exhaustive operating guidelines why MDM programme seems so vulnerable
to various kinds of challenges and risks ranging from logistics, poor hygiene and food quality, supply chain management and intermittent food poisoning?

**Design Intervention in MDM Programme**
Margolin & Margolin (2002) say ‘The primary purpose of design for the market is creating products for sale. Conversely, the foremost intent of social design is the satisfaction of human need.’ Considering MDM as an initiative of social design, design intervention through creativity and innovation here can ensure that the needs are satisfied.

It’s possible at the level of need assessment, identification of discrete problems and system touch points, visualizing solutions, system innovation, making prototype of physical infrastructure, technology innovation to improve operational systems and finally in reevaluating policy impact. Cox (2005) rightly says: ‘Creativity is the generation of new ideas. Innovation is the successful exploitation of new ideas. Design is what links creativity and innovation. It shapes ideas to become practical and attractive propositions for users or customers.’ The application of creativity and innovation through design intervention can make public policies far more relevant and effective.

**References**


