

# Understanding public Participation in public policy

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Participation is a concept as well value some what echoing poputaristic our tone. People as public are said to be aware of their involvement in the assessment of their own needs and in the determination of the priorities of public policy. As policy consumers they are individually and collectivity aware of their own predicaments, human rights and public affairs. So, Participation by implications involves all promotional activities and modern extension services tilting policy intervention in favor of community interests. Organizationally linked both horizontally and vertically participatory institutions are an effective channel of communication between policy communities and the public as the beneficiaries of development.

Public policy as the means of allocating values and setting development goals becomes a factor of facilitating / constraining participation. Redistributive policies prevent misallocation of resources and opsided access to inputs and logistics reducing vulnerability of the poor to dependence relationship. Favorable public policy in the direction of empowerment of the vulnerable masses serve as a suitable institutional mechanism to ensure a more equitable sharing of power, a high level a concretization about human rights and capacity building of the disadvantaged group to bargain hard with elites as the dominant policy actors.

## Public policy

A fuller understanding of public policy cannot be obtained only by a small collection of definition of the concept. For the connotation of public policy is based on a broad conceptual plane. A wealth of literature on the subject gives us a modicum of understanding public policy<sup>1</sup>. Even then one should ask what is not public policy rather than what it is. Many a variable running through the concept is brought into definitional continuum to facilitate understanding polemics and activism associated with the operational

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aspect of government, autonomous bodies, NGOs and participatory institutions.

Public policy, as such, is wide ranging encompassing a variety of substantive areas-agriculture, industry, environment, energy, education, health, poverty alleviation and so forth. One has to conceptually understand the causes and consequences of the projected programmes of goals, values and practices in connection with these policy areas and related issues.

As public policy is a mere reflection of the choices and to preferences of the upper echelon in the hierarchy commoners hardly find any access to opportunities for placing policy demands. They are ignorant about policy issues the treatment of which calls for technical knowledge, intellectual intervention and bureaucratic expertise.

### **Public Participation**

The concept of public participation has assumed growing significance now-a-days. It tantamount to enhancement of public involvement in the determination of priorities in tandem with their own choices and preferences. Participation also means mass involvement in social action, social movement, awareness building, bargaining, social mobilization, forming association/club, organizing meetings, seminar / workshop, collective contact with official and development partners.

Studies-to-date on the concept outlined the issue of public in development jargon<sup>2</sup>. Public participation is anchored in decentralization, democratization, mass organization, consumer's association and group formation with collective interest. Public means ordinary masses, community of people, and a vast body of citizens enjoying civil and political rights. It also means tax payers, electors, beneficiaries and consumers of public policy.

### **Prospect of public participation**

The prospect here is bound up with the development of egalitarian society with redistributive measures, democratic participation and decentralization. The thematic views on development policies as reflected in contemporary studies on poverty alleviation reveal a growing concern about public as beneficiaries. Poverty alleviation programs are expected to positively affect the society with participatory development interventions. The performance of the plenty of action programs has to be satisfactory to



minimize the gap between aspiration and achievement.

In poverty alleviation rhetoric empowerment of the vulnerable is the frontline component of participation. There has been a policy intervention to activate the vast reservoir of human resources to educate the poor, to reduce income poverty and enhance their nutritional status. Such intervention is a symbol of realization about the inadequacy of the resources of the poor and the powerless.

Of late PRSP has been accepted as a time bound strategy to help the poor reach access point. Policy analysis and advocacy about targeted safety net and empowerment of the poor in the PRSP purports to accelerate pro poor economic growth to give a tangible meaning to egalitarian society. Understandably Millennium Development Goal (MDG) has marked poverty reduction as one of its projected objectives. PRSP is a strategic concept paper drafted in line with such objectives.

The state recognizes the critical importance of participation for poverty alleviation. There has been a concern about accelerating promotional process with the participation of NGOs and local self governing institutions to break the chain. This is process of community regeneration to enhance the abilities of the left outs to mobilize, manage and control local and external resources. The whole range of the recent policy action relates to the gradual obliteration of poverty syndrome even in hard core poverty situation in putting the last first. The poor are to be directly approached with program inputs and the stated purposes of advocacy for policy strategy.

Democratic participation or democratic decentralization promotes democratization of fundamental policy institutions. The extent of such participation ensures representation, public debate and new leadership. This is an institutionalized expression of public participation having much to do with opinion polls, public hearings, national and local elections and referendum on outstanding issues. An election not only provides the electorate with an opportunity to express its opinion but also ties key office holders directly to their constituencies. The thread of removal from can functions as a powerful control over policy<sup>3</sup>.

Participatory democracy in action as a pre-requisite to public participation can hardly be judged as insignificant. It expresses itself as truly democratic institution to influence policy making in a desired manner. It is a

guard against tyranny and erratic authoritarian behavior. It serves as a channel of information with the involvement of interest groups, civil societies and mass media.

### **Myth of participation**

Public participation is quite rhetorical. In reality participation in policy making becomes instrumental only on the basis of economic position, organizational strength and political power. The masses of lower order are not properly represented in public bodies, NGO's and private organizations. The result that may follow is that the level of net achievement in terms of desirable changes in socio-economic indicators- 'measures of well being in society is not attained'.

As public policy is encapsulated by bureaucratic rituals and intricacies in technical aspect of planning, programming and resource injected in it the structure of participation in accommodating a large variety of individual preferences is far from effective. A number of scholarly works indicate that bureaucratic participation is responsible for the failure of reform programs in developing countries. Reform programs may emphasize decentralized planning. Local leadership, bureaucracy and technocracy may find a chunk of opportunities in working out the modalities of participatory local planning.

Public policy hardly concerns with the needs of the consumers. Rules and regulations associated with policy operations tend to quench public choice and undermines the interests of consumers of goods and services<sup>4</sup>.

Adverse socio-economic climate negates the thesis of public participation. In reality the public does not have proper place in policy arena. Public policy takes little notice of participatory measures. Elitism is the revealing aspect of social life. Overlapping of elite in all stages in policy cycle is obvious. The concern for beneficiaries participation continues to remain the concern of elite.

Public policy is institutionally shaped without little relevance to the issue of public grievances. Institutional focus is too narrow to allow for free flow of opinions. It does not seem to provide an outlet for participation in open ended discussion. An inwardly directed policy making process cares little about outstanding and minor issues.



### **Consumer's rights : Points to ponder**

A strong institutional base for ensuring consumer's rights is quintessence of consumer's participation. It shapes feedback mechanism to accommodate a large variety of consumer's preferences. Consumer's associations as organized citizen bodies – civil societies in other words- are doing their utmost as watchdog to prevent any obnoxious process that impairs normal functioning of market. The concerns for protection of consumer's right against such processes remain the concerns of the consumer's association.

A vibrant civil society with consumer's activism as citizens can redynamize governance in information age articulating the interests of the consumers of goods and services. Participatory components of consumer's sovereignty in western democracy provide institutions for communication between the policy community and consumers. The members of the policy communities being the members of the civil societies reinforce such communication. This is clearly manifest in the advocacy for normal market operation enabling the consumers to have access to goods and services.

Growing partnership between the business communities and consumers/customers is a sign of participation. Consumer's sovereignty as anchored in such participation may go to the extent of forming consumer's society for awareness building, market information, consumer's preferences for good and quality services in competitive market, and protection against the evils of syndication. In Bangladesh, for example, there are associations of stakeholders to speak for the consumers in conference rooms and meetings. This is, of course, a dear indication of participation. Yet, anti-adulteration drives taking place now and then makes it clear that the vulnerability of the consumers to the whims of unscrupulous traders has reduced such participation to nullity.

Public choice theory is a convenient analytical tool conceptually understanding policy consumers. It stretches over a wide array of choice-centered activities fitting well into democratic structure and economic liberalism. Such theory, as such, provides knowledge about the underlying dynamics of consumerism as an essential ingredient of consumer's sovereignty. Input-function of public policy seeks adjustment with economic environment taking stock of public demand for consumer durables and competitive price in the market. Any policy change in economic world like market that tends to influence public choice. The cardinal point in

public choice is methodological individualism in the application of rationality in democratic theory and economic liberalism. It proclaims free flow of market transaction without interruption and distortion. Market is supposed to operate in normal conditions to maximize social welfare.

Predicaments of the consumers are associated with distortion and malfunctioning of the market. In Bangladesh such predicaments have become a way of life. A market deterioration in the material conditions in the stressful economic life has seriously affected consumers leaving them into a cauldron of crises. On the contrary, the upstart traders in collaboration with criminal syndicates have been stumbling onto overnight riches. The concerned authorities have a tendency to blissfully overlook such crises. And, the ordinary consumers happen to be 'a threatened species'. The upstart traders amidst criminalization of business are consistently swindling them. The proceeds of business—not according to rules – have shattering impact on policy consumers. Inordinate profiteering, hoarding, black marketing, and adulteration matter a lot in afflicting the consumers.

In Bangladesh, the urbanities now live in the state of insecurity as well as uncertainty. Two – fold dangers confronting the urban consumers are under consumption and health hazards arising out of price spiral and massive adulteration. The onslaught of criminalization in commercial operations continued to jeopardize the rights of the consumers in the recent past. Added to it many a fraud practice unnoticed by the authorities went against public safety and security. Even now, the ordinary consumers have much less access to the concerned authorities and the latter have been found to be inefficient – not equal to the task in the face of manipulation of the market by the criminal syndicates.

However, social movement in consumer's regime puts consumerism first. 'Consumer's Voice' is at the heart of such movement. Of course, belatedly, the Consumer Association of Bangladesh organized such movement through awareness building campaigns, conferences, rallies and publications. This is in response to the development of consumerism at the global level. Initially, there were four globally recognized rights of the consumers: 1. the right to safety, 2. the right to be informed, 3. the right to choose and 4. the right to be heard.

Later on, four more rights were incorporated in the UN guidelines for consumer protection. They were: 1. the right to protection against exploitation by unfair trade practices, 2. the right to protection of health and



safety from the goods and services the consumers buy or are offered free, 3. the right to get the grievances redressed and 4. the right to physical environment that will protect and enhance the duality of life'. Of course constitutional provision of basic necessities recognizes protection of life through safe and clean food, 'safe drinking water, public health hygiene, sanitation and safety.

Consumer Association of Bangladesh (CAB) is the first non-governmental voluntary association that works towards shaping the themes of the development of consumer's rights. The major areas of its concerns include, thus, education for the consumer, investigation of the consumer complaints, advocacy for consumer right, research, information and documentation, campaign against health hazards, etc.

CAB speakers at 'a daylong orientation of media personnel's in Rajshahi 'Underscored the need for enacting a law for protecting consumer's right' focusing on the 'right to information, choice, redress and representation'.

The consumers are always deprived of the quality of services of gas, water, electricity, education and health. The CTG has already approved in principle the consumer Rights Protection Ordinance 2007 to provide "full-fledged legal cover for consumer's interests. The proposed new ordinance provides for the formation of a 21-member council with Commerce Minister as its Chairman including Presidents of FBCCI, jatiya press Club, CAB and a representative from civil society as other members. The committee will enjoy the functions like preparing policy guidelines, holding periodic meetings, conducting research and formatting committees at the district and sub-district levels.

It indicates that something positive is going to happen to promote development of consumer right as a social movement. We cannot but appreciate the role of CTG in shaping legal dimension of consumers rights against the contextualism of inflationary stress, abnormal price-spiral, adulteration, rigging in weights, etc. The process of legislation started since 2001, but it was held up for a long time.

### **Actions Suggested**

Actions Suggested for the kind attention of the policy makers may be mentioned below :

- Business malpractices in existence in the country have damaging

impacts on the consumers. Adequate intuitional control may well be exercised to minimize such practices that are responsible for extremely high prices, adulteration, shoddy commodities and environmental degradation. It is advisable to rid market of all kinds of distortions enabling it to operate transparently to maximize social welfare.

- In a conference on 'Business and Society' held on 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2007 at Hotel Agrabad, Chittagong, there was a thematic paper focusing on the need for a comprehensive competition law in Bangladesh. This is, of course, thought provoking. We know anticompetitive business practices are characterized by hoarding, 'restrictive supply of essential commodities,' 'collusive price-fixing' and 'abusive monopoly'. Such practice tends to hurt consumer's interests. The article highlights among others recommendations: pro-competition economic policies coupled with a competition law to ensure a competitive market economy. Competition legislation can prevent 'collusive cartels,' 'unscrupulous market dominance,' 'unfair mergers and acquisitions' and other anti-competitive business practices.
- Consumptive value added tax (VAT) is certain to come under review. This sort of indirect tax makes consumers bear the burden of tax imposed on each transition. Such tax is added to the value of the sale of goods and services in retail price shops. But the burden is shifted to the consumers leading to price hike all to their dissatisfaction. And, the extreme use of VAT system touching even the trivial matters, as was the case with economic management style of the Ex-finance Minister, might vex the consumers inviting vehement public criticism.
- Governance has now become a much talked about issue featuring prominently in development dialogue. What is considered of importance is development of social capital as reflected in past business tradition in the Eastern Countries molded by the moral values of socialization. We should consider ethical social fabric, religious spiritual moorings, positive mindset and corporate governance.
- E-governance for commercial operation and customer service is a good idea. But, we are lagging behind in the field of service marketing or customer service. It requires efficient management of service organization to focus sharply on the needs of the customer. Banks rendering credit and ATM facilities may be advised to remove unnecessary charges.
- Now services in the age of information offer much promise to consumers are threatened to be deprived with lingering with bureaucratic constraints. We should take lessons from the new paradigm like new



public management (NPM) that proclaims flexible bureaucratic operation in favor of the consumers. The CTG seeks to involve public sectors in the distribution channel of business to counter-balance business malpractice in the private sector. This is a good idea calling for wide networking.

- BSTI ought to be revamped with enhanced manpower to promote adequate capacity disposition. Its operational coverage needs to be extended both horizontally and vertically. Here, attention may be called to strict monitoring of the quality and size of the food products in bakeries, food industries and restaurants. What really matters much is the practice of reducing the size of the food product on the plea of price hike of the ingredients like wheat, edible oil etc. Such practice should not go unpunished. Authorities should take a serious view of the profiteering tendencies of the sweet traders. When the price of sugar increases, they turn to increase the rate of sweets per K.G, when it falls (the rate of sugar) they do not go back the previous rate.
- Establishment of Consumer Development Council.
- Advocacy for public policies to protect the rights of the consumers.
- Empowerment of CAB with infrastructural facilities to strengthen consumer's movement. There needs to be a functional collaboration between CAB and BSTI.
- Formation of consumer's cooperatives in each housing society to facilitate participatory marketing.
- Improved action of public utilities like WASA, WAPDA, PDB, DESA, TNT, TITAS, enabling them to meet the rising expectation of the consumers in modern time using New Public Management ( NPM ) as an acceptable doctrine.

## Conclusion

The rhetoric of participation can be viewed from the perspective of non participation of the public. Public content to participation in policy making may be conceived only as cosmetics. This seems to be the paradox of democracy. The real actors are political elite in political nature of public policy. Even then mass opinions are institutionalized through representation in various public bodies, committees and councils. Bureaucratization of implementation process makes rhetoric of participation more expressive. The rigidity of the bureaucratic culture is dysfunctional to public participation.

However public policy that steers in normative order to achieve its goals – the promotion of public good is the outcome of the various forces includ-

ing organized citizen bodies, So public participation is epitomized by good governance through sensible bureaucracy accountable for its action to the people and various interests groups – even the associations of disadvantaged people like the landless, weaver, women and vulnerable children, participating in public affairs.

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